Rural Voids

Miriam Driessen

Prologue

Residents seem to have left Qinghe in a rush. In front of one of the deserted homesteads lie an old bridal chest and open school books, wet from the rain, scattered on the concrete threshing floor. Horse nettle has proliferated along the walls of the house. In the corner next to the side door, which is adorned with a faded poster of popstar Han Geng, lies a pair of ripped jeans and a shoe without shoe laces. The house is boarded up completely, in contrast to the neighboring home that was vacated a few years earlier. Some of these homesteads are easy to enter, such as that of the Zhangs. Their home is flanked by untended banana trees, their dried leaves covering the ground. In the bushes opposite the door dangles a lost umbrella. The Huang family, who still live next door, use the flat roof of the animal pen to dry corn kernels and the old pig sty to raise chicken.

The side door that leads to the kitchen is open. The old fireplace is surrounded with pots, bottles, jugs, jars, tins – empty or filled – and pieces of unused fuelwood. A plastic chopstick holder hangs from a hook on the wall; one lonely chopstick remains affixed to it. The earthen floor of the main room is dotted with brown leaves that have fallen through the cracks in the roof. Sunbeams slant through the splits in the reed mats that are attached to the front of the windows and draw lines all the way up to the ancestral shrine – or what is left of it. The red paper couplets of the shrine that are glued to the wall too tightly have been left, the others were taken along. On a wobbly table next to the main door lies a broken suitcase coated with a layer of dust. Worn-out trousers, shirts and socks peer out. Beneath the suitcase, on the ground, lies a construction helmet – likely a remnant of the time when the Zhang family's only son worked in Guangdong, in southern China.

The Zhangs have turned their backs not only on their family home, but also on agriculture. What used to be the son's marital room is stuffed with farming tools, such as a rake, a plow, hoes, and a fertilizer sprayer. Dried corn cobs, used to stir up the fire, cover the floor. The scent of burned wood has remained. Moving away means leaving the farming equipment and the animals behind – apart, perhaps, from a few chickens and a pig, to be consumed at the annual Spring Festival. The Zhangs have even turned their backs on Mao. The portrait of the former chairman, suspended in a clear blue sky above Tiananmen Square, surrounded by Chinese peonies of all colors, is coming off the wall. Creases spoil Mao's wrinkleless face.

Void villages

As urban regions change in China, rural regions change no less dramatically. Although this is certainly not a novel insight, it is one that is often forgotten, for rural transformations easily escape the visual and auditory senses of those who are enchanted by the spectacle of infrastructure development and the promises of modernization – processes that are firmly located within the bounds of the urban. But if urban growth in China has attracted a lot of national and international attention, rural change has largely gone unnoticed and unrecognized. The invisibility of rural change is a result not just of distinctive sensations, but more importantly, hinges on entrenched valuations of "the rural" and "the urban": the former dismissed as being backward and poor, the latter hailed as modern and affluent. Being intimately connected, the rural is not only the city's binary other (Bach 2010), but also its constitutive underpinning, in the socio-demographic as well as the discursive domain. Rural out-migration is a precedent for urban growth, as is the repudiation of "the rural" in the celebration of "the urban."

By reflecting on the effects of out-migration in rural Guizhou, a province located in what is known as China's "Great West," this essay seeks not only to render rural transformations visible, but also to shed light on the discursive context in which these changes occur. The setting is Qinghe, a small village that sits on top of a cliff in south-western Guizhou.[1] Qinghe is surrounded by terraced fields that are barely recognizable as such anymore, as proliferating trees have blurred the steps of the terraces. Qinghe used to be home to 27 families: at the time of writing, there are only five households left. Settlements like Qinghe are commonly classified in China as "empty-heart villages" (*kongxincun*), or "empty-shell villages" (*kongkecun*), concepts that are not completely accurate given that these settlements are not just "hollowing-out" (*kongxinhua* or *kongkehua*) – a process that describes the abandonment of more centrally located houses for new properties on the edges of the village (see e.g. Jiang and Luo 2014; Liu and Yang 2013; Smith 2010); rather, Qinghe and many other settlements in mountainous regions in China are likely to be fully deserted in the near future. I like to refer to Qinghe as a "void village;" not so much to describe the settlement's state of shrinking, as to signify the classification of the village as non-viable or "void," not only by the government, but also by its own residents.

Apart from questions of how and why villages like Qinghe are abandoned, this essay explores the discursive construction of emptying villages as dysfunctional – I take "void" to mean not only "empty" or "desolate," but also "ineffective" and "useless." What I will refer to as "rural voids" exist as a built (or unbuilt) environment and a social reality, such as described in the prologue, as well as a conceptual entity. As the rural condition is denigrated in people's minds as being empty of significance and meaning, "rural voids" signify the contempt for, and neglect of, rurality in an urban-centered world. As "hurdles" on the path to urbanization and modernization, void villages like Qinghe are of great concern to the state – even though the state ceased to be involved with the development of these settlements a long time ago. Qinghe's connection to the electricity grid in 2002 must have been the last major state investment in the village. The very existence of rural voids is held to be a sign of backwardness that spoils the image of a nation that aspires to be urban. The state's concern with these villages can thus be explained by the fact that rural voids constitute the very underpinning of urbanization and modernization in China today. Without the backward and the rural, the modern and the urban do not exist.

Outbound

At the end of the 1980s, Qinghe counted 27 families. The first family to move out did so in 1990, settling down in the valley that runs below the village. Throughout the 1990s, Qinghe's residents started moving away temporarily for work in Guangdong, Fujian and other provinces, to return home during the Chinese Spring Festival. Those who were successful built or bought a property lower down the mountain. None of Qinghe's residents gained a foothold in the cities where they moved to for work, which reveals the limits of the widely hailed "urban–rural integration" policies that seek to address and redress the wealth gap between city and countryside in China. Most families turned their backs on Qinghe after the mid-2000s. It had taken those families about 10 years to accumulate enough savings to leave their, often dilapidated, family homes behind to move closer to the road that runs to the foot of the mountain. The village can only be reached by a steep climb of one to two hours over a

First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to the family who welcomed me into their home and allowed me to experience everyday life in a Guizhou mountain village. I also want to thank Kuang Qixiang, who accompanied me on most of my travels through south-western Guizhou, and taught me how to climb. I have greatly benefited from thoughtful and insightful comments from Sonia Lam, Nanke Verloo, and two anonymous reviewers of *Public Culture*. This research project has been generously funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

[1] I use pseudonyms for most place names and personal names.

rugged mountain trail. The residents who are left in Qinghe at the moment of writing are not the old, feeble, sick or disabled, as China's rural "left-behind" are commonly described (He and Ye 2014), rather, they are of a generation, now in their fifties and early sixties, that was too old to prosper in the city as rural-to-urban migration started. What is more, these residents shouldered the burden of paying the educational fees of school-going children and, in the case of three families, encountered various misfortunes. The old, feeble, sick and disabled have, apart from one bed-ridden woman in her early nineties, fortunately moved out with the help of their adult children.[2]

Most members of the first generation of migrants who left Qinghe temporarily in the 1990s, such as Old Huang, were pushed out by simple poverty. Huang left his home village for the first time in 1993, when there was not enough to eat. He took up work as a coal carrier at a mine in north-western Guizhou, where his older brother worked, to return after one month. From the CNY[3] 120 he earned, the family ate cornmeal until the rice harvest later that year. Huang's oldest son recalls that when he first went to school in 1994, the family did not have enough money to meet his school fees of CNY 34 for the semester. The first time Old Huang left the province was in 1998, when he followed the Zhangs' only son to Guangdong to work in a brick kiln. In the second half of the 1990s, the number of people who left their homes to work increased dramatically: Old Huang became impatient, afraid he would miss out. In 1998 he lived away from the village for the whole year. With the money he earned during that year the family refurbished their homestead and replaced the reed roof with a tiled one.

Those who left Qinghe in the 2000s had different aspirations and expectations. The second generation that left Guizhou's rural areas largely did so in pursuit of wealth and a modern personhood, as *dagong* (the word often used to describe working away from home) had become a way of life.

Guizhou's karst mountains are routinely held to be the cause of the province's marginal status in China. The lack of plains makes the province unsuitable for large-scale mechanized agriculture. The land can only be farmed manually and by working animals. When the son of the Wang family and I were taking turns plowing a long but narrow terrace with a water buffalo, he smirked and noted how this was the type of agriculture that CCTV (China Central Television) is reluctant to report on. "They [CCTV] prefer to broadcast large agricultural estates and mechanized farming, or even airplanes that spray chemicals over large tracts of land." This manual type of agriculture practiced in Qinghe was described by another resident as "farming with painstaking effort, yet with love and care." However, not only does manual labor on the land yield little money, it has also come to be seen as backward – this was especially the case during the 1990s. In contrast to the Cultural Revolution period, in which the countryside figured as an ideological high ground, providing a classroom for the urban youth, the countryside came to be viewed as a "field of death for the modern personhood" (Yan 2003a: 578).

Moving to the cities is still seen as an escape, both in time and space. "Walking away from the high mountains" (*zouchu dashan*), as people from Guizhou phrase it, is an act of breaking free rather than leaving behind. In China, mobility is inextricably linked to one's

[2] Although the old have largely moved out of Qinghe, the elderly people do make up a large share of "the left-behind" in China's countryside. Estimates have counted an overwhelming 40 million left-behind elderly, or 37 percent of the total elderly population in China. Many of them rely on family support (He and Ye 2014: 353), while land continues to play an important role in guaranteeing a basic living. Circa 80 percent of the elderly still till their land (ibid.: 355), while many of them also look after grandchildren. To describe the ageing of the farming population, in the face of a younger generation moving away, He and Ye (2014) introduced the concept of "grey agriculture."

[3] One Chinese Yuan (CNY) equals about 0.15 USD and 1 USD equals 6.68 CNY as at September 2016.

place of origin. This is a consequence of the household registration (*hukou*) system,[4] as well as the all-encompassing nature of the urban–rural divide in terms of education, health care, social networks, and so on. Only urban citizens have the right to (be in) the city, whereas their rural counterparts are just passing through as transients (Zhang 2002). The recent pushback from the cities renders the barriers that await rural migrants, especially those who carry the double burden of coming from the countryside in poorer *western* China, ever more challenging. The surging living costs in the cities, rather than institutional restrictions (although these continue to exist), constitute the main hurdle. Social mobility has decreased significantly, making it harder "to make it" in the city, in spite of high hopes and expectations of doing so. The youngest son of the Huangs, who had dropped out of primary school, could not wait to venture out to Guangdong when he was in his late teens. Nowadays he spends longer stints of time in Qinghe to help out his parents with farm work, hesitant to go out in search of work that, in his own words, will not earn him anything.

The wave of migrants who "washed their feet to enter the city" (*xijiao jincheng*), an expression that depicts the removal of the dirt – literally and figuratively – of the countryside before entering the city, was put in motion by largely foreign-invested industrialization in China's coastal provinces, a process that put pressure on the supply of cheap labor in the early reform period. This new "pull" from the cities coincided with a long-existing "push" from the countryside, where improvements in agricultural productivity and demographic growth had increased rural "surplus" labor.[5] The lack of economic opportunities in the countryside compelled rural citizens to rely on poorly paid work in the cities. The majority of migrants who left their homes for the coastal cities, however, hailed from central, not western, China (Ye et al. 2013: 1122). Many in Guizhou were held back by financial and social risks. Those who left were young. The lives of migrants remain uncertain and perilous, so migrants hold on to their fields – even if they lie idle.

Qinghe's residents used to cultivate plots of land that were allocated to them in the early 1980s, when the household responsibility system brought an end to the rural collectives of the Mao period.[6] From then on, families were free to decide what to produce and how to sell their produce. In 1982, Old Huang's father was allocated a plot of land, which he divided in 1985 among his three sons, who all received a more-or-less equal share (a little bit more than five *mu* each).[7] In "old Mao's time," as villagers refer to the era of Mao Zedong, they were told to grow corn. Only in the Deng Xiaoping era did they shift to rice cultivation, as rice proved more profitable, fashionable and tastier (in contrast to cornmeal). They continue to grow corn, which is now used as fodder. Some of the lands that were allocated to Qinghe's residents were located far from their homes. I was told how tiring it was to work on this land – especially carrying manure all the way to the fields and carrying the harvested crops all the way back. Now that many farmlands are abandoned, villagers in Qinghe are tilling the vacant

[4] The *hukou* system was established in the 1950s in order to restrict the movement of peasants to the cities as to keep the price of grain low enough to support industrialization. Under this administrative system, people born in urban areas are officially registered as "residents" (*jumin*), whereas those in rural areas are registered as "peasants" (*nongmin*). Although the system has been relaxed in recent years, the system remains an obstacle for the majority of rural citizens to relocate to the city with their families on a more permanent basis, as they do not enjoy the social benefits of urban residents and often pay higher educational fees and medical bills.

[5] "Surplus" is in quotation marks, as it were often the able-bodied young men and women, who were needed for agricultural labor that left the countryside.

[6] Land is divided into land for wet-rice cultivation (*tian*) and land for the cultivation of corn and vegetables (*di*). *Tian* are small and level plots with edges (or paths) to avoid the water running away. *Di* can slope a bit and are used for the production of crops, such as corn, that do not need irrigation.

[7] One *mu* equals circa 0.06 hectares.

fields of friends and relatives closer to home.[8] They do so free of charge or in exchange for a small share of the harvest – a cordial agreement that is referred to as *renqing* (favors as a sign of friendship). This arrangement, in fact, benefits both families. Those who have migrated can guarantee that their lands will not fall into disuse and be overtaken by wild vegetation; thus, they are assured of a way back home if the need arises.

The landscape of Qinghe has changed tremendously, a process that Old Huang described as creeping. He and his wife have, however, reacted soberly to these changes. They attempt to adjust their lifestyle in harmony with nature, as they have always done. Reaching high up into the sky, the tea bushes of the Yangs, who moved out in 2009, have far exceeded the standard height. They used to enjoy sunlight but the foliage of the trees that have sprouted between them now cast a shadow over the tea leaves. Where weeds grow waist high, the farmland is no longer recognizable. In particular, the fields that are located on the steepest parts of the mountains are now covered with young trees, bushes of bamboo, grass, and ferns. But the peach, plum, cherry, bayberry and loquat trees scattered along the fields, continue to bear fruit – abundantly so. The terraces that stretch to the mountain tops are deserted. In the not-so-distant past, the water buffaloes were accompanied all day when they were let out to graze, as the tender made sure that they did not devour his or her neighbors' crops. Now that the neighbors have moved away, the buffaloes can be left on their own. They are brought to suitable grazing grounds in the morning, to be collected in the early evening. More recently, though, the weeds and trees have grown so tall that it has become hard to find the buffaloes and bring them home. The Chens were the first to put a bell on the neck of the mother buffalo in 2014; the Huangs followed suit.

I only realized fully the extent and impact of reforestation around Qinghe when I accompanied Old Huang's two sons to pay their respects to the dead during the Lantern Festival in 2016. We left in the dark, torches in hand. The grave of the father's older brother, who died of lung cancer in 2013, after having worked his whole life in the coal mines, was still relatively easy to find. The youngest son sprinkled liquor in front of the grave, lit a cigarette, and stuck it between the stones. In our search for the grandmother's grave, on the other hand, we had to trek through thorny bushes, treading down and pushing away tree branches. The stones of the grave were almost fully covered with weeds. Grandmother, who passed away in 2008, was given an offering of fruit candies.

Government visions

The fact that Guizhou took the 44th place in *The New York Times* list of "52 places to go in 2016" (2016) coincided fortuitously with sustained efforts by the Chinese central government to resuscitate the region's deserted mountain tops. "Authentic Chinese hill tribes without mass tourism – yet," reads the headline of *The New York Times* promotional piece. Guizhou is touted as a province that "has long been one of China's least accessible regions. As a result, its ethnic minority Miao and Dong mountain villages retain an unhurried pace and authentic feel …" Thrust back into the past, the province's mountain villages and their residents are portrayed as remnants of a bygone era, not spoiled by tourism – yet. Seeking to promote mountain tourism by reviving (and reinventing) tradition, the Chinese government is equally guilty of a discourse that denies Guizhou's inhabitants and villages contemporaneousness with the present (Fabian 1983).

To be sure, the supposedly isolated "hill tribes" have long been integrated into the national and international economy. Much like their Han counterparts, most of the ethnic minority villages have lost up to three-quarters of their population to the cities: at least for

[8] The Huangs, for instance, own 2 *mu* of *tian* (land for wet-rice cultivation), and 3 *mu* of *di* (farmland – in this region, located on sloping spaces). They continue to grow rice on their own *tian*, but they cultivate other crops, including corn and a variety of vegetables, for their own consumption on former neighbors' *di*.

most of the year. Since China's reform period their youth have flocked to the coastal provinces to contribute to the economic miracle. They continue to do so. Their apparent authenticity has been revitalized by generous government spending in an attempt to advance "primordial ecology" (*yuanshengtai*): that is, the "spectacular ethnic diversity and a life-nourishing environment" (Luo 2017: 2, see also Kendall 2017) of the province, to create a harmonious symbiosis between nature and culture. Subsidies are offered to minority populations with an eye to retaining their customs and folkloric dress in the face of a firm rejection of everything that is old. Delegates, tourists and researchers are entertained with demonstrations of traditional handicrafts and performances of music and dance. Under the banner of "the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside," villages have been "tidied up" – in particular, those along the major highways. Large-scale infrastructure and housing projects are colloquially known as "face projects" or "track record projects," as they maintain the "face" (reputation), or improve the track record, of one individual cadre or the county government, rather than benefit ordinary citizens.

"Only so many villages can become tourist destinations," remarked the eldest son of the Huangs, dryly. Qinghe is in his eyes too remote a place. In the books, the settlement is a designated Miao village, its residents belonging to the Miao (Hmong) minority. "Back in the day, the administrators did not bother climbing up the mountain to see who is living here," he grinned. The Huang family belong to the Han. Qinghe is in fact composed of Miao, Yi, and Han families, yet all residents have "Miao" indicated as their ethnicity on their identity cards.

China's new bent toward boosting tourism as a strategy of breathing new life into the countryside, is akin to initiatives in Japan in the 1990s, when the Japanese government engaged in targeted afforestation and the frenzied building of holiday resorts in rural regions to attract urban tourists as part of a nostalgic return to the *furusato* (hometown) (Love 2013; Knight 2000). The sense of Japanese authenticity that was deemed to have been lost amidst the destabilizations of capitalist modernity could only be found in the idyllic landscapes away from the cities (Ivy 1995). It is a yearning for what the Chinese metropoles can no longer offer – fresh air, blue skies, green pastures and a glance at what China used to be, before it was spoiled by modernity – that drives Chinese urbanites to the countryside for the weekend or the summer holidays. The concept of "rural nostalgia" (*xiangchou*), which has recently been promoted, suggests a very similar refashioning of the home village into an urban consumer commodity (see e.g. Park 2014; Luo 2017). Indeed, this type of discourse reinforces conceptual binaries that frame the rural as traditional and the city as contemporary.

Whereas recessionary Japan has moved away from the government-sponsored rural development strategies of the economic heyday and toward "regional activation" initiatives at the grassroots level (Love 2013), the Chinese government continues to invest, if highly selectively, in the countryside, by introducing policies that aim to improve the livelihoods of the rural population. Seeking to maintain stability and to legitimate its own rule by sustaining income growth across the board, the stakes of the government in improving the situation in the countryside remain high. Of course, it is questionable if these schemes will be effective in the long run. It is often mistakenly assumed that residents, whose houses have been revamped under the auspices of the construction of a New Socialist Countryside, will stay (Zhang 2013). They often migrate nonetheless, leaving their nicely refurbished houses behind as empty shells (*kong ke*).

In early 2016, Qinghe's residents awaited their turn to be incorporated into the "precise poverty alleviation" (*jingzhun fupin*) scheme, a nation-wide program set up by the central government in a bold effort to upgrade the whole of Chinese society to a level of "moderate prosperity" (*xiaokang*) by 2020. In Guizhou, the scheme aims to "shift poverty nests" and "pull out poverty roots," as policy documents have it, through the relocation of the poorest rural households to urban regions. Whereas in the West we may tend to classify all

sorts of social ills as urban (Krause 2013: 233), in China social ills are commonly ascribed to the countryside, and the government is eager to find urban solutions to rural problems. As soon as peasant households have settled in the city they are classified as being lifted out of poverty: a logic that speaks to the discursive binary of the countryside as being poor and the city as being affluent (while ignoring the growing problem of urban poverty).

The concept of *anzhi* that is used to describe poverty alleviation migration, which means "to find a place for" – the Chinese character *an* carries such meanings as calm, safe and secure – belies the disruptive nature of *de facto* eviction, fashionably framed as "new-style urbanization." The "target households" of the *jingzhun fupin* scheme are households with an annual income per person of less than CNY 2884, and households living in "empty-shell villages" that are composed of less than 50 households and have a poverty ratio of over 50 percent. Qinghe's residents await poverty relief with a mixture of skepticism and hope. At the end of April 2016, two of the five households were found to be eligible to move to the city. The other households, albeit envious of the compensation sums offered to their neighbors, were relieved. Emotionally attached to their native place, the families that are left in Qinghe are reluctant to leave their land and animals behind.

The Huang family moved to Qinghe during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). One of the few traces left by the first generation of Huangs in Qinghe is the old pear tree that stands alone in the corner of the family's largest terrace. I was told by the youngest daughter that it bears the juiciest pears in the region. The first Huangs passed away a long time ago. Father and mother, 57 and 56 years old, are the only Huangs left in Qinghe. Their four adult children – two sons and two daughters – have all moved away. Whereas their oldest son did well in school, and went on to university, their youngest son dropped out of school in the sixth grade and stayed "a peasant" (*nongmin*), in the words of his elder brother. The oldest daughter (and oldest child) left for Jiangxi in her late teens; the youngest is still in college in Guiyang, the provincial capital. Her elder brother, who joined a party school after graduating from university, pays for her education, as he provides financial support for major purchases and miscellaneous expenses, such as medical bills.

However, father and mother Huang are, by and large, able to subsist from their land and livestock, and the small pension Old Huang receives (CNY 240 per quarter). The CNY 10,000 they get from their eldest son every year at the Spring Festival disappears into a drawer and is still there the following year. The family grows corn and rice, the staple crops, Chinese cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, garlic, sorghum, soy beans and sweet potatoes for their own consumption. They complement their diet with wild herbs from the mountains, such as fiddlehead, edible fern fronds, and chameleon plant. When produce is plenty, they give a share away to friends and relatives, or sell it on the market. They also raise chicken for sale and occasionally sell one of their water buffaloes. Taking advantage of Qinghe's location at the border of two poorly-connected county districts, Old Huang's wife has started trading in locally-produced tea, which she buys at the Sunday market in the township closest to their home for CNY 20 per *jin*,[9] then sells it for triple that price at the Thursday market in a town in the neighboring county. She carries the produce in a pack basket as she traverses one of the highest mountains in the region, which constitutes the border between the two districts.

The eldest son of the Huangs describes the surroundings of his native village as "unsuitable for mankind (*renlei*) to live," thereby emulating government rhetoric, which, in order to justify the relocation of rural communities, classifies regions in which people have lived for centuries as "uninhabitable." He does so with the cynicism often expressed by those who live in a sociality that is continuously devalued in dominant discourse (Steinmüller 2010). Labeled as "fragile eco-systems that are disaster prone" (Huang 2014: 68), these

[9] One *jin* is approximately 500 grams.

regions are cast as being in dire need of environmental protection, which leaves wholesale relocation of its inhabitants as the most, if not the only, viable option. Relocation justified by environmental protection and poverty alleviation is not a new phenomenon in China. Experiments with the policy of resettlement in "concentrated villages" (*nongmin jizhong juzhu*), in which peasants are relocated from emptying settlements into denser villages dates back to 2001 (Ong 2014). The year 2010 saw the implementation of the "increasing versus decreasing balance" (*zengjian guagou*) land-use policy that sought to prevent the further loss of farmland and reduce the number of rural communities in China by way of what was called "settlement rationalization" (Long et al. 2012: 12). Between 1996 and 2008, China lost about 6.4 percent of its farmland, while its population increased by more than 100 million (ibid.). Owing to out-migration, the number of villages in China decreased from 3.77 million in 1990 to 2.66 million in 2008 (Chen et al. 2014: 103).[10] The idea behind the scheme was to achieve a balance in the supply of land by adjusting increases in urban construction land, driven by urbanization, with decreases in rural construction land, caused by out-migration. Implemented at the county level, the policies were top-down in nature and proved extremely lucrative for local governments, which have made ample revenues from land development transfers in peri-urban regions – but much less so in secluded regions like Qinghe, in which the local government has little or no interest. Governments happily let nature take back these vast mountainous areas.

Indeed, local governments are reluctant to invest in infrastructure for shrinking rural settlements. The pattern of permitting remote shrinking communities to "die" by withdrawing subsidies and removing state infrastructure has been met with fierce resistance in the West (Long et al. 2012: 19). The retreat of the (central and local) state from such regions has been controversial. Top-down resettlement on such a massive scale is more likely to happen in China – not, however, without a compelling discourse that casts the state as a benefactor that redeems its rural citizens by bringing urbanization and modernization, as I will illuminate below.

On the face of it, poverty alleviation migration is voluntary, yet the number of households that are to be relocated is set beforehand and local officials are expected to visit homesteads and talk residents into making a decision that is commensurate with the figures on paper. "Thought work," it is called. During these meetings, officials broach the conveniences of modern city life and the preferable lifestyle changes residents are expected to make, while brushing aside questions of subsistence – something rural residents are most anxious about (see Chuang 2014 for similar observations in Sichuan). "How can we make a living without land?" is the disconcerting question of the two Li families in Qinghe, who are eligible for poverty relief. The contract that residents have to sign should they refuse to move ends with an admonition ("one shall bear the consequences of his/her own decision") that is threatening to say the least. Residents are given little time to consider their decision. The younger brother of Old Huang, despite having left Qinghe for Guiyang over 20 years previously, was also eligible for poverty alleviation and relocation. (His household was still registered in his home village.) He was called to the township one day, where he was informed about the procedures and given half an hour to make up his mind. The two Li families signed too, if worriedly. The document stipulated that the families should leave their homesteads by November 2016. As at early 2017, none of the families have moved yet. They insist on staying.

The force of the urban bias

[10] Many of these villages have undoubtedly been "swallowed up" by the urban sprawl, rather than abandoned.

Precise poverty alleviation has effectively deemed Qinghe, along with many other shrinking settlements across China, dysfunctional, non-viable, or even destructive to the surrounding environment. This discursive force should be understood in a context of aggressive top-down urbanization policies that hinge on, and feed on, deep-seated valuations of "the rural" as backward and poor, and "the urban" as modern and affluent. What is more, these valuations have taken hold of the minds of their residents too. Recognizing the relationship between city and countryside in China as ambivalent and equivocal, Fei Xiaotong (1953: 108) distinguished two perspectives on Chinese urban–rural relations. The first views the city and the countryside as complementing each other, while the second deems them antagonistic. In recent history, Chinese society has witnessed multiple shifts between these perspectives. The period right after China's opening-up witnessed a flourishing of agriculture, as rural collectives were dissolved. This period also saw the mushrooming of Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs), set up under the purview of local governments. Rural growth, and a relatively harmonious co-existence of city and countryside, was short-lived. As a consequence of increased privatization and official discrimination against TVEs in favor of foreign enterprises, they lost their competitiveness in the early to mid-1990s, which saw the beginning of China's rural crisis.

It was the peasant who came to be viewed as the fundamental cause of China's slow development (Day 2013: 5). Only by "developing" the peasant, making him/her more productive and efficient, educated and conscientious, could he/she become a truly modern Chinese citizen, and China a truly modern nation. Since the early reform period, when the state sought to raise the quality of the population, the peasant body has symbolized the lack of value or *suzhi* (quality) (Anagnost 2004). As *suzhi* came to mark "a sense and sensibility of the self's value in the market economy" (Yan 2003b: 494), it was fashioned such that each individual's process of "becoming" ran parallel to the nation's modernization (and urbanization) project (Murphy 2004).

Throughout the 1990s, the future of China's countryside divided (urban) intellectuals into two camps: the Liberals and the New Left (Day 2013: 7). The former argued that the rural crisis could only be overcome by deepening market reforms. The latter, in contrast, saw the market reforms as the root cause of the rural crisis and advocated a return to socialist-style state intervention. Both strands agreed that something needed to be done about the status of the peasant and the state of China's countryside. In response to the widening urban–rural income gap, which was worrying for the government, given its potential for protest and unrest, the "Three Agricultural Problems" (i.e. peasant, village and agriculture) were placed at the top of the agenda by then President Hu Jintao (2002-2012). Xi Jinping, who started his leadership in 2012 by remarking that "[i]f there is no moderate prosperity in the countryside, especially in the poor regions, then there is no all-around moderately prosperous society" (Zhao et al. 2015: 50), continues to view rural development as a key policy target, and introduced the word "precise" to describe new poverty alleviation efforts.

Nonetheless, I sensed in conversations and interviews with grassroots officials in rural Guizhou, that the tendency to hold the peasant accountable for rural underdevelopment remains pervasive. The burden of responsibility for the peasant's condition and the failure to alleviate him- or herself from his or her plight, is, then, shifted onto the individual, whereas the systematic failures and biases of state policies are downplayed. Guizhou's peasants, many of whom live from remittances and subsistence farming, are held to be either unwilling or unable to improve their lives for the best. They are disparagingly referred to as "little peasants" (*xiao nongmin*), as if they are stuck in a state of infancy, stubbornly refusing to grow up. The "little peasant" and his/her lack of quality (*suzhi*) are to blame for the limited success of poverty alleviation. Or worse, the peasant does not even realize that he/she is in need of redirection. "Say you give a farmer 200 Yuan," one female official explains, "He has

no idea how to use it. Or you give him 1000 Yuan. He might buy a bit of rice, a bit of oil, and a bit of meat, so that in the short run his life has improved. But does this make any sense?" She concludes optimistically, however, that "some do have the brains. Their mentality will change. They will buy chicken or ducks and start raising them in order to sell them, and use the money they earn to buy even more [chicken or ducks]."

In the eyes of officials who are shouldered with the task of increasing agricultural production, the main tier of poverty relief, peasants lack market consciousness. "They [the peasants] happily live one day like any other." The worst, according to another official, are those who have never left the countryside. Returnees from the cities are more likely to have acquired "new ideas" and are perceived to be less rigid-minded, and thus more receptive to government policies. In particular, the "little peasant mentality" (*xiaonong yishi*) – a somewhat scornful notion that is used to describe farmers who are seen as "merely" satisfying their own needs and thus failing to contribute to the greater good or attend to their duty of being productive – receives the blame for the mixed success of government campaigns. The subsistence farmer is charged with "narrow-mindedness," "short-term thinking" and lack of "consideration of the public benefit" (Peng 2007: 118-119). Officials lament that peasants lack any interest in investing in agriculture and only think about the next opportunity to move to the city. Labor power that is "just sitting there," as yet another official put it, ought to be a disgrace. Many peasants "till a bit of land" to "make sure their families won't starve" and fail to use their labor power more effectively. Productive labor power is used here in the classical Marxist sense: that is, labor that produces a surplus (in whatever form). Subsistence labor does not fit into this category, and thus has to be reformed.

That rural citizens in Guizhou only think about the next opportunity to move to the city is not surprising. The current situation, in which unaccommodating geographic conditions and a shortage of labor power severely limit the possibilities for intensive agriculture, only allows for what has been coined a "Chinese-style little peasant economy" (He 2013); a subsistence-based economy in which there is no capital or youthful energy for agricultural investment. The homestead and the fields, albeit crucial as a form of social security, are hardly perceived as a locus of productivity. They are voids that, due to urban-biased institutional frameworks, have been left behind economically and socially as a whole (Xiang 2007). Yet left-behind communities have been divided between those that are deemed, by both the government and the residents, to be functional and viable, and those that are not.

Despite having lived in Qinghe for generations, most residents endorse the state's view that their native place is unsuitable for human beings to live in, even if they do not want to leave. Former residents rarely return to Qinghe – only, perhaps, to size up the China firs on their fallow lands, the durable scented wood of which is used to manufacture coffins and that fetches a large amount of money. Occasionally they venture up the mountain to collect medicinal plants, or pay respect to their dead during the Chinese New Year or at Tomb Weeping Day (Qingming Festival). Mostly, the steep climb stops them returning. What is more, they have more important things on their hands.

If scholars have long challenged urban–rural dichotomies (Gillen 2016; Lacour and Puissant 2007), governments continue to employ them for political purposes. Thus, while the urban in the early twenty-first century has become "a quintessential floating signifier: devoid of any clear definitional parameters, morphological coherence, or cartographic fixity" (Brenner 2013: 90), the Chinese state remains intent on defining and fixing the urban parameters (for instance, through population administration, such as the household registration system), and seeks to delineate the urban through discursive and classificatory processes. It thereby retains and recycles urban–rural binaries, while refusing to perceive of the urban and the rural as a continuum. To be sure, the state discourse feeds on the economic

and social realities of the day, and vice versa. Agriculture's share in the Chinese economy has fallen from 40 percent in 1970 to 10 percent, while the share of labor employed in the agricultural sector, albeit still significant, has gone down by half, from 81 percent in 1970 (Deininger et al. 2013: 505).

Debates in China about the countryside continue to be overlaid with normative concerns about modernity and urbanization. Indeed, inequalities between the city and the countryside are reinforced by a dense discursivity that renders the countryside the city's binary other. Whereas the city is construed as civilized, cultured, orderly and clean, the countryside has been viewed to be the city's opposite: uncivilized, deprived, disorderly, and dirty (Bach 2010: 425). Imbued with structures of inequality and hierarchy (Stasch 2016), these discursive binaries can be compelling, and have undoubtedly provided an extra push in the back of millions of rural residents to migrate to the cities: the number of residents doing so is estimated to have increased from two million in 1980 to 277 million in 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics 2016). While the rise of rural tourism in China today, as well as initiatives of the (urban-based) "back-to-the-land movement," including such projects as the Bishan initiative by Ou Ning, challenge the rejection of the rural sphere, negative valuations of the countryside are still very much alive in the minds of those who grew up in, or who live, in rural China.

When I asked former residents of Qinghe, who came to visit the Huangs, what had changed since they had moved away, I received contradicting answers. "Everything has changed! This here all used to be corn fields," said a man who had moved away after having worked in Guangdong for a good number of years, and who was able to build a property close to the county town. "Nothing has changed! Only the trees have grown a bit," contended a former female resident, who had married into another settlement, with a condescending sneer. The first answer hinted at the visual transformations Qinghe had undergone, whereas the second answer signaled a lack of change in terms of (wo)man-made progress, and cast Qinghe as a void. In the woman's view, "natural" transformations, such as reforestation, did not count as change. This line of thought is representative of the discursive rejection of the countryside as a site of progress – and of change, for that matter. Whereas the urban is perceived to have a telos, as buildings grow taller and urbanites more wealthy, the Chinese countryside is seen as being bereaved of a telos – at least in this particular moment in time. Expectant eyes are directed to the country's cities, since 2011 home to at least half of China's 1.3 billion-large population. One of the features of this discourse is the tendency to assign agency to migrants, while denying the left-behind any agency – and not only that: the left-behind are deprived of dignity and respect.

That discursive binaries are still very much alive was also driven home to me by the response of Qinghe's residents on my presence in the village. Residents were surprised I was able to hold out in a place like theirs, and that I was willing to stay there in the first place. Life in Qinghe was considered to be bitter (*ku*), and therefore unbearable. Surely, they reasoned (correctly), I would soon return to the conveniences of city life. The classification of Qinghe as a place that ought to be left behind, as bitter and unbearable – in contrast to sweet and pleasant city life – stood in sharp relief to the reluctance of the last five households to move out. I sensed a pervasive tension between a dominant discourse imposed upon their lives and native place, which the residents emulated when talking to outsiders, and more intimate feelings about Qinghe that spoke of attachment and affection. Nonetheless, dominant narratives were compelling. Why continue to live in such bitter circumstances when a sweeter life awaits you elsewhere? Why remain in a place that one ought to escape? These questions highlight how migration has inspired migration over the past decade, and how it has left behind rural voids.

Coda

"You should make as many photos as possible," said Old Huang with a solemn voice as we were having dinner one evening. "You should put them on Weibo. You should go to China Central Television (CCTV) and tell the government about the poverty we live in." He took a short breath. "Tell them that we need a road. If you tell them this month, they will start construction by next month. They will be finished before next year's Spring Festival and I can come and pick you up from Beijing." Even to people like Old Huang, who do not use the Internet, the Chinese microblogging website Weibo is known to be a popular platform for addressing incidents of injustice at the hands of government officials, and social problems more generally. CCTV, on the other hand, is the state television broadcaster. Old Huang saw both media as channels to give voice to his family's predicament that had hitherto fallen on deaf ears. Surely, Old Huang reasoned, the government would listen to a foreigner.

Old Huang's hopes for a road to be constructed to his home village speaks of a tension between the state's desire to relocate the residents of these villages to urbanized settings and residents' desires to have the state build a road to connect their village to the city. On this evening, I also came to realize the vulnerability of the Huangs, their powerlessness in changing the fate of the village, and the sadness that overwhelmed them every time yet another family moved out. Just after I had left the village in March 2016, Old Huang received a phone call from the township administration. He was told that his family would not be considered for poverty alleviation, on the grounds his unmarried eldest son held a government post with a stable job, and the household was thus considered "moderately prosperous." His son, who lived and worked in the district city, thus underwrote his parents' move out of Qinghe. Fear struck him: the fear of potentially being the last family left. Yet the fear faded after a week or so, to make place for relief.

Building a road up the mountain was not deemed worthwhile for the five families that were cast as stubbornly holding on to a feudal lifestyle. The depiction of rural citizens as undeveloped and unsophisticated, and thus in need of development, justifies uncompromising top-down schemes, such as poverty alleviation migration, which seeks to do just that – develop the peasant. In the dense discursivity of the state as it engages in separating the developed and the modern from the undeveloped and to-be-modernized, rural voids are spaces in which inhabitants are deprived of rights as well as respect. By classifying residents as recalcitrant and irresponsible peasants, ignorant of the public benefit, the state renders acceptable the choices it makes to invest in one settlement and to neglect another. In this essay, I have attempted to underscore the discursive context in which void villages come into being (and are destined to perish). Perceived as physical structures that owe their present state to prolonged out-migration, the formation of these villages is seen as demographically self-evident and inevitable. The normative aspects that go into their making are underestimated. Rural voids are very much the outcome of discursive practices that construe these spaces and their residents not only as lacking a telos, but also as a nuisance that mars urbanization, and stains China's grand narrative of modernization.

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