

PhD Title

Densifying rural territories: China, from massive growth patterns to more sustainable urban planning

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Article Title

Nested maps : reality representation as a first action against erasement process

Abstract

The author's doctoral research is primarily focused on analysing the issue of rural urbanisation as a key sustainable development challenge – based on the conviction that rural areas today must be studied on their own account and no longer simply understood as the counterpart to urban areas (Wood, 2010).

In China, vast rural areas are currently undergoing “modernisation” via the application of a generic, expansive urban model. This modernisation is evidenced in the creation of new towns and road infrastructures – a process that simultaneously homogenises the complex reality of both rural practices and regional characteristics, flying in the face of natural resource availability and significant climatic and cultural disparities (Friedmann, 2005). This forced coexistence of urban models conceived ex-nihilo (top-down) and the reality of a rural area (bottom-up) generates interactions – and major tensions, too.

This article will draw on one of our case studies: the modernisation currently under way on Chengdu Plain. Chengdu Plain is a major agricultural production centre that still functions with a traditional rural system, supported by a dense fabric of rural villages (linban) spread across the territory. The region is currently undergoing transformation and urbanisation on a massive scale – a process that has been amplified by the need for reconstruction following the devastating earthquake of May 2008 (7.8 on the Richter scale). This is a region that has experienced major human and material losses; its modernisation and reconstruction are a response to economic, social and political challenges.

Analysis of the “nested” maps allows us to observe the reality of a region at a given time and different scales. The 500 km sample represents a region with a radius of 250 km around the area of study i.e. a surface area of 200,000 km² (20 m ha). This allows us to locate our case study on the national scale (proximity to major urban hubs, industrial centres, major communication routes, etc.) and also in terms of major landscape features (coastal areas, mountain chains, major rivers, etc.). It should be noted that 250 km is the distance that can be travelled in a day's journey; in our view the impact of elements beyond this distance is no longer related to their geographic proximity. The 100 km sample, i.e. a radius of 50 km around the area of study, allows analysis at a more local scale, situating the study zone within its more immediate context. Finally, the 2 km sample covers the micro-local context, on a scale appropriate to walking and “soft” mobility. This scale permits precise observations of relations between the built environment, farms, fields and forests, allowing us to begin the process of identifying and classifying the elements that constitute the reality of the Chinese rural condition.

