

Intellectuals and the Land

The Schoolhouse at Mutianyu Great Wall was proud to host this month a selection of leading Chinese and international intellectuals at The Brickyard Inn & Retreat Center at Mutianyu Great Wall, where they spent two days to discuss the relationship between Chinese intellectuals and the land. This workshop was made possible as a part of The Schoolhouse Fellowship program, which brings intellectuals, artists, craftsmen, and students back to the land to explore rural relationships, development, and society.

Presented in the attached documents are short thought papers and introductions to each of the workshop participants, a cross-section of academics, journalists, and thinkers who are each uniquely engaged in the analysis of China's past, present, and future.



Workshop Summary (for full texts of each presentation, click here)

If creation comes at the intersection of largely exclusive disciplines, then this workshop provided the perfect outlet for exploring the issues inherent in discussing the countryside. Gathering such a disparate group of intellects in one room, discussion was at once about categories, names, representation, policy, and development. It was a discussion that wasn't contained by a focus on intellectuals and their work, but which reached out to the practical realities of rural livelihoods and rural society.

Day One

Friday's workshop focused on 'The Land,' with a lively conversation kicked off by author and activist Chan Koon-Chung, who made the case for opposing the very words we use as limits on our discourse and search for solutions. Who are the 农民工 if they are neither 农民 nor 工人? We persist with a political and social narrative that follows, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that these people will one day return to their lives in the countryside. In fact, these '农民工' can't and won't go back to a countryside in which they have no role - they are stuck being neither fully urban nor fully

rural. Intellectuals can no longer persist in using these categories, and instead must rebuild our language of engagement based on the reality of social roles.

Reminding us further that words and categories can be both inadequate and misunderstood, David Kelly laid out a comparative and historiographical case that the idyllic village life that is part of our basic understanding of China may in itself be false. Building on the work of scholar Qin Hui, Dr. Kelly called for a re-evaluation of rural China's relationship to the state, breaking free from the intellectual constraints imposed by our adherence to the village unit or 'small community' model, and instead focusing our efforts on recognizing full citizen benefits for all rural residents. Rural reconstruction as it is currently practiced is doomed to failure until we recognize and address the political, economic, and cultural power of the 'big community.'

Professor Huang Yang of Peking University introduced a distinctly personal and deeply emotional tone to the workshop discussion, reminding us that more than titles and categories, rural residents and peasants have lives and struggles of their own, and that any discussion about rural issues should address their fundamental needs. Drawing on his own experience, Professor Huang noted that some Chinese intellectuals come from the poverty of rural villages, but escape at the first opportunity to chase knowledge, wealth, and success in China's booming cities. We can't idealize the lifestyle of the countryside, and we can't imagine a way back to the countryside for today's intellectuals until we make it prosperous, habitable, and an integral part of Chinese society.

Rounding out the workshop for Friday was a thought-provoking historical and gender-based look at the control and impact of rural imagery by the state. Political scientist Vera Fennel of LeHigh University brought her experience and research in China to the discussion of rural imagery of the 1950's through 1970's not by insisting that it represented or materially improved the lives of rural women, but by demonstrating that important differences in status and position can be changed through orchestrated state effort. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, rural women were suddenly elevated from the status of mere chattel to be fully-fledged second-class citizens. Women's role and connection to the land is part of a constructed narrative, and it is important that our approach to rural issues remain cogniscent and respectful of the power of narrative to change reality.

Commenter and Schoolhouse partner Jim Spear capped our discussion for the day with a note about humanity and a thought about value. Regardless the nomenclature, he has lived on the land and among the 'peasants' off and on for over a decade before building The Schoolhouse, and his overwhelming feeling is one of respect. He echoed Huang Yang in reminding us that these are real people with real ambitions, real stories, and with real abilities. Given the framework and incentives to develop, there is no one better equipped to take control of their future than them. They are sitting on an enormously

valuable asset in the land, and when this value is finally recognized, by law or by force, then our entire understanding of peasantry and the countryside will change.

Day Two

As the sun rose over the Great Wall in Mutianyu, our conversations turned to “the intellectuals”—who are they, what are they doing (if anything) about rural issues, and what “should” they do? Getting our hands dirty, we focused on the engagement and interaction of intellectuals with the countryside, returning often to a discussion of the context and origin of the *sannong* 三农 (农业, 农村, 农民 - rural industry, rural communities, rural people). Key questions for this session were - How can we turn the poverty and backwardness of the countryside into something more productive and sustainable? How can we begin the transformation from a peasant into a farmer?

The groundwork for understanding “who are intellectuals” was laid by Hao Zhidong of the University of Macau. Dividing intellectuals into organic, professional, and critical intellectuals, Professor Hao took us back into the history of rural-intellectual engagement in China, a tradition that dates back to rural reconstruction efforts of Liang Shuming and James Yen in the 1920’s, 30’s, and 40’s. Organic intellectual tradition in China is related to the scholar-official, or workers in political and government affairs. These researchers and officers drive the government policy and implementation. Balanced on the other side of the equation are critical intellectuals, who are highly independent of the government and who actively work to correct and critique policy on the ground. Professional intellectuals, in a departure from both government critique and support, have traditionally focused their work on rural expression and implementation, working for universities and NGO’s as they face rural issues. Hao concluded his talk with a call for integrating the different intellectual classes, which he views as the only way for us to make progress on rural development.

True to Zhidong’s call for integration, Liu Laoshi, a professional and organic intellectual brought with him more than just academic theory and research, but a great deal of hands-on experience working with the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center of the Renmin University, Beijing. Understanding the 三农 problem through his own critical experience, Professor Liu gave an insightful breakdown of how establishment intellectuals have developed their understanding of rural development, and also shared with us his unique work with www.3nong.org, a youth-driven NGO that is helping China’s rural residents find new means to development, happiness, and livelihood.

Professor Tim Cheek rounded up the discussion of intellectuals with an historical perspective. He reviewed the institutions, roles, and identities that shaped China’s educated elites over the past century and a half—from Confucian “scholar-officials” who took Imperial State Exams and served the dynasty while being local gentry in the

countryside, to the disruptions of the Republican period during which rural society was drained of its organising elite (who were lured to the new Treaty Port cities and modern life there), to the re-establishment of a connection between intellectuals and the land through the CCP, communes and even “sent down youth” in the 1960s. Tim’s point was to remind us that who intellectuals are, what they do, and what institutions they can use to do something have changed meaningfully over the 20th century, and thus what we see today is not the *only* way China and her intellectuals and rural society have to be: there’s choice, and a rich array of examples from history.

A Conclusion

After two days of engaging conversation, beautiful Great Wall views, and healthy homemade village eating, we departed Mutianyu for the Liang Shuming Rural Reconstruction Center, in the Wenchuan district of Beijing’s hinterland, where we were greeted by the smiling faces and full gardens of college students who were taking their efforts back to the land. While our own engagement with the land was being framed in classrooms, offices, and hotels, their own dug down to the very roots of the plants that bring life and livelihood to the countryside.