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Dazhai, modernity and self-sufficiency in the collectivised villages of Maoist China.

Abstract

The essay explores facts and collective imaginary that marked the agricultural modernisation of the first decades of the People's Republic of China (1949-1979) through the story of Dazhai village and its reconstruction. From the transformation of the landscape to the creation of services and spaces consistent with the new organisation of work and the associated life proposed by the Communist Party, the contribution follows the evolution and dissemination of models, guidelines, and rural interventions developed during Maoism. The essay concludes tracing the Maoist signs in the current Chinese policies of rural development.

Keywords

Dazhai — Collectivised villages — Production Brigade

China often is compared to the United States since both are about equal in area – China has nearly 3.7 million square miles and the United States slightly more than 3.6 million – and both occupy similar latitudes. Differences, however, are more important than similarities, and perhaps none is of greater significance than the higher proportion of land in China unsuited for intensive agriculture and settlement. Most of China consists of hills, mountains, and high plateaus; only 12 percent of the surface is in plains and about 19 percent in basins. Most of the basins contain semiarid and arid deserts which, thorough flat to rolling, are of little agricultural use. Only 11 percent of China is now under cultivation, and little additional land is physically or economically suitable to augment this total. (CIA 1971)

The *Atlas of the People's Republic of China*, drafted by the US Central Intelligence Agency in 1971, opens with this epigraphic description. Yet, despite such a clear-cut and foreign assertion, China heroically tried to extend its agricultural land by multiplying its arable land on daring terraces (World Bank 2022). The mountain slopes of entire provinces around the central plain – in Sichuan, Gansu, Shaanxi and Shanxi – were divided into thousands of dry stone terraces, built by hand and tended like a garden. Today, travel books describe them as a traditional landscape. Urban visitors nostalgically take photos, dazzled by the idealised image of a rural world believed unchanged and timeless, as if the historical processes that shaped its face had never happened. Yet, there is nothing traditional about this landscape that, for a certain period, found its paradigm of modernity in the victory of humankind over nature (Shapiro 2001). Indeed, China's most audacious and precarious terracing is evidence of the Cultural Revolution and Maoism's years. In previous centuries, the countryside had never been worked with such intensity and care. No matter how populous

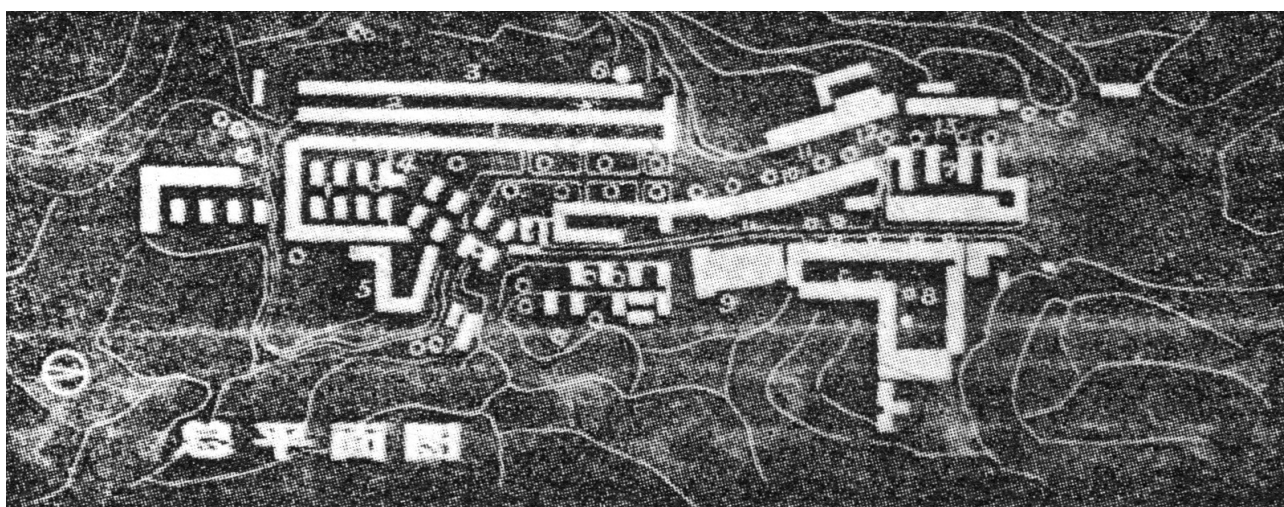
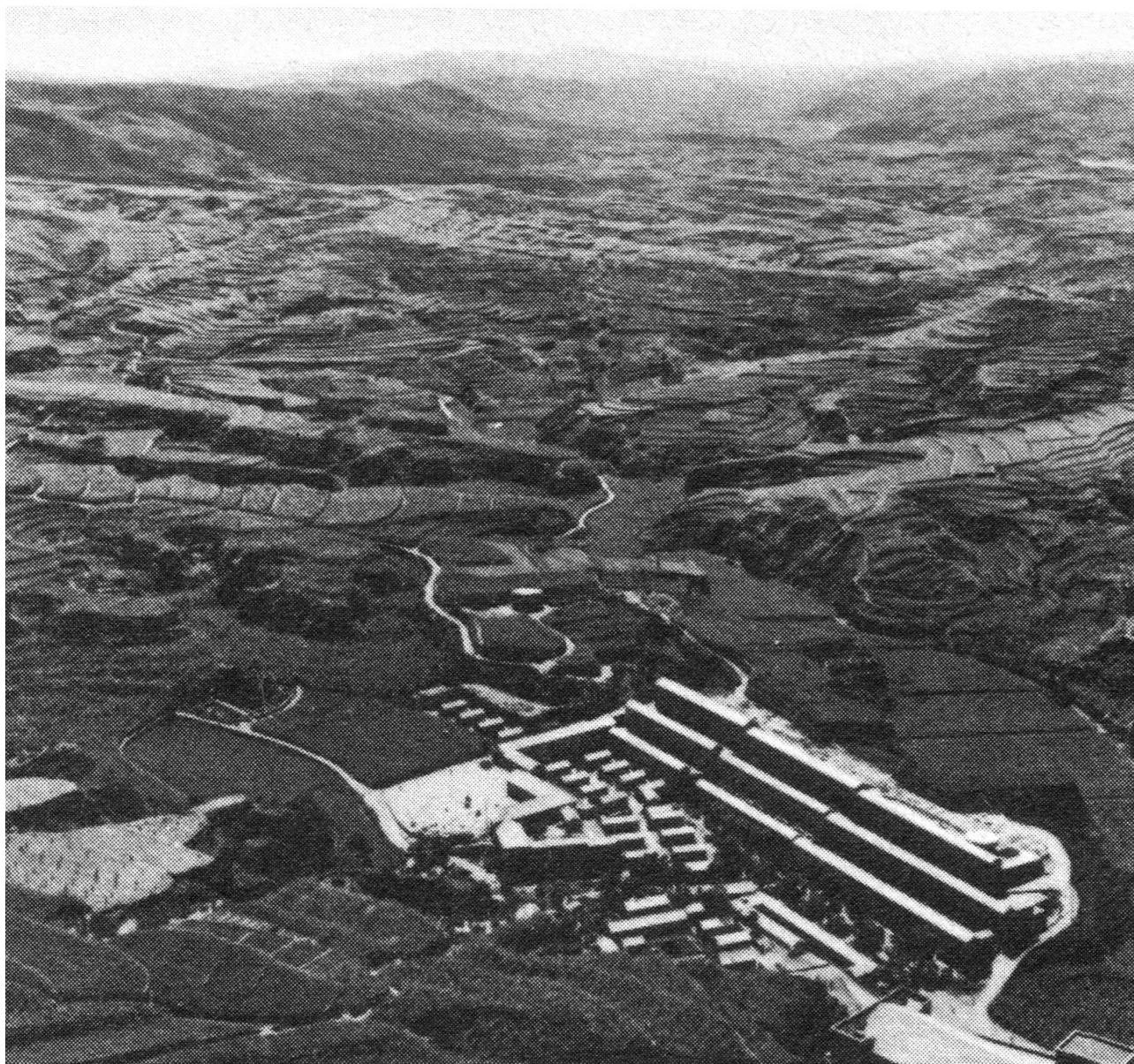


Fig. 1
Panoramic view and floor plan
of Dazhai new village (Spazio e
Società, 5 1979).



Fig. 2
Dazhai new village (China Re-constructs 11, November 1974).

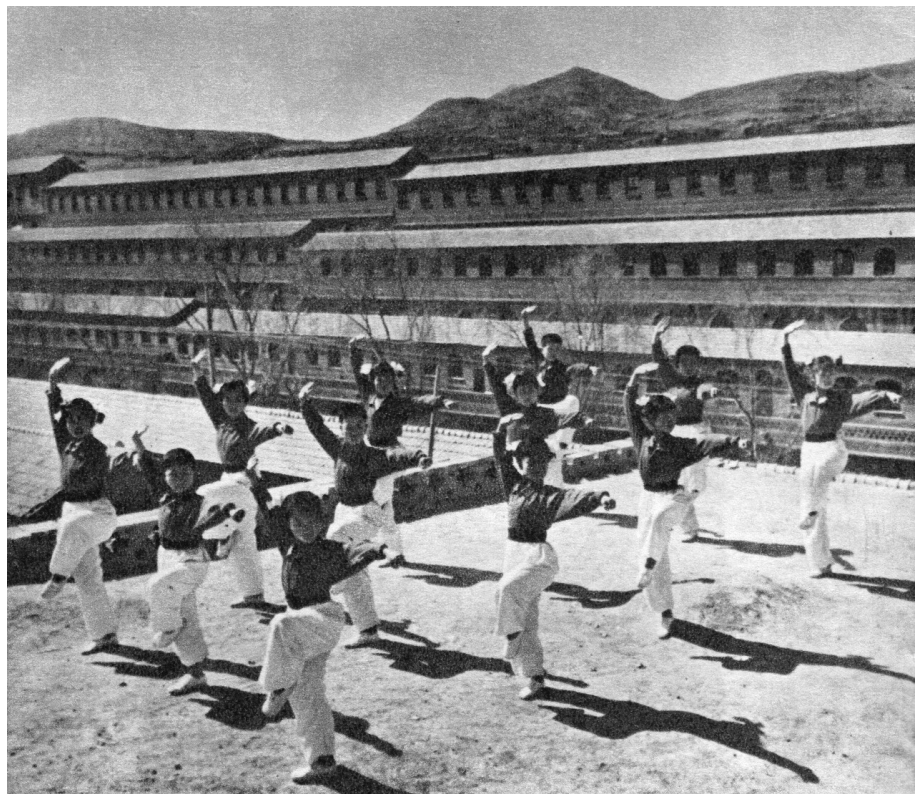


Fig. 3
Children's team trains in Chinese boxing, Dazhai brigade (Tachai: the Red Banner, Foreign Language Press, Peking, 1977).



Fig. 4

Terraces made by the Dazhai brigade (Spazio e Società, 5 1979).

or motivated the country was, it had never had the strength or the economic convenience to push fields so high. Only between the 1950s and 1979, the economic isolation, deepened by the break with the Soviet Union, and an optimistic but irresponsible demographic policy led peasant China to pursue the epic goal of achieving food self-sufficiency by pushing crops to impossible heights (Cammelli 2016). Under the motto: «In agriculture, learn from Dazhai», entire forests were cut down, lakes were dried out, water channelled, and even the steepest slopes were moulded to accommodate agricultural crops.

The small brigade of Dazhai, a village of eighty-two households on some 80 hectares of rocky hills in northern Shanxi province, became the rural paradigm of an entire nation in search of its own version of modernity.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, the inhabitants of Dazhai firstly organised in an agricultural production cooperative, then as a production brigade of the *Red Flag* people's commune, completely reshaped their land and rebuilt their village. Since 1953, following their ten-year land reclamation plan, the brigade transformed ravines and hillsides into cultivable terraces through tenacious, manual excavation and backfilling works. In 1963, after a devastating flood, due in part to human land transformation, the inhabitants of Dazhai rearranged the reconstruction, refusing the aid offered by the state. In February 1964, their story reached the pages of the *People's Daily* and from there, the village's reputation as a model of agricultural productivity and rural self-sufficiency spread throughout the country and beyond. The following work plan included a series of necessary hydraulic works: 11 wells, a 190-metre-long underground tunnel to collect rainwater, 7 km of aqueduct, and a 3150-cube-metres of water reservoir. The only outside support was a Red Army squadron that assisted the brigade in the more complex hydraulic realizations, according to the practice of the time. Proceeds from farm work were then gradually invested to increase production by purchasing tractors, machinery and trucks. They also started a forestry business planting 40,000 fruit trees and 80,000 pine trees (Hinton 1988; Zhao 2007). Between 1964 and 1974, besides agricultural work, also the village was rebuilt. Collective functions were gathered in a series of brick buildings, ordered in parallel blocks on a rectangular geometric layout. Instead, the residential spaces – 770 rooms of minimal size – followed traditional housing types in the region: vaulted houses carved into the slope and in-line houses with double pitched roofs. These types were organised in rows on several levels. The resulting plan layout was thus completely alien to the spatial distribution of traditional rural settlements, organically organised around vegetable gardens and small water basins. Residential rooms faced onto large rectangular open spaces acting as a street, farmyard, exercise ground or courtyard according to the need by Further buildings with a more complex programme, in accordance with the principles of people's communes, were gradually constructed: kindergartens, primary school, night school, clinic, library, youth centre, canteen, post office, and an auditorium. Finally, repair shops were located at one end of the settlement and the breeding farm was built on the hill at a distance from the houses. Everything was completed with brigade members' savings and collective labour (Gavinelli 1979, Knapp 1992, Zhao 2007).

Like Dazhai, hundreds of villages and rural areas were radically transformed or rebuilt by their inhabitants, reinterpreting the ideals and models proposed by the Party with the means at their disposal. Since 1952, the press began to focus on the identification of model villages (*mófàn cūn* 模

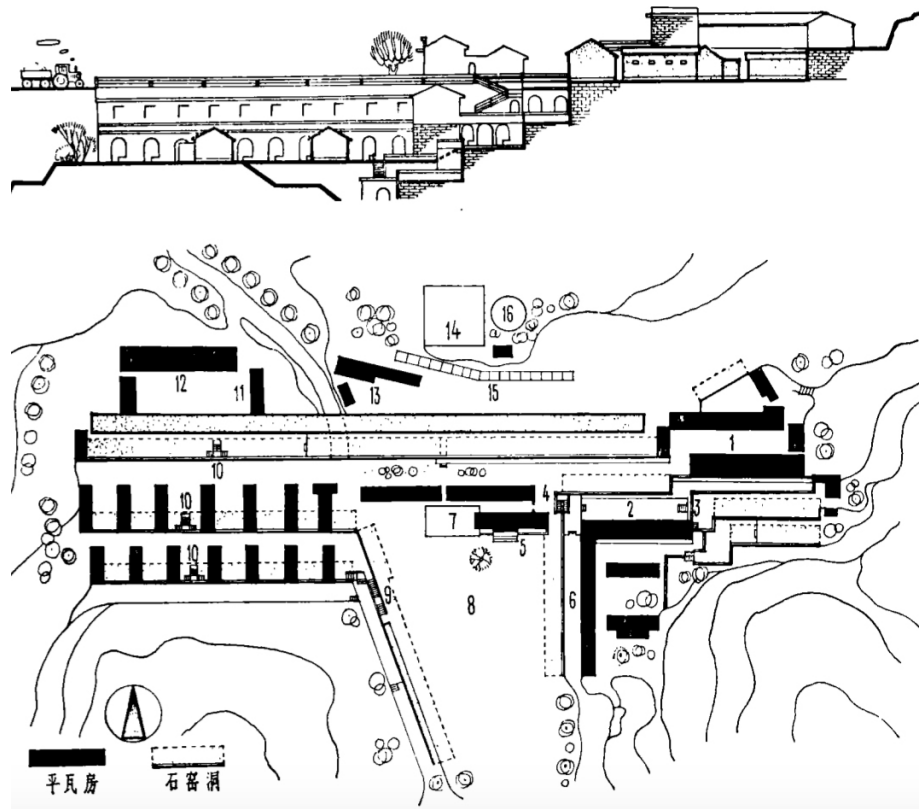
范村) following a praxis called ‘from point to surface’ (*yóu diǎn dào miàn* 由点到面). The expression describes the methodological process that let small administrative entities test innovative solutions in response to a common problem defined by the central government, which, in turn, spreads positively evaluated experiences as nationwide models (Heilmann 2008). This approach was outlined during the Maoist years and became a methodological attribute of the People’s Republic’s decision-making process, still widely applied nowadays. While policies have since been transformed and sometimes reversed over the years, the dynamic relationship between centralized authority and decentralised experimentation has always been a fixed feature that has enabled the application of this operational methodology (Chung 2016). In Mao’s period, the rural territory was administered by the decentralised direction of people’s communes and collectivised villages, that were totally independent in organising their irrigation (canalisation, reservoirs), production (land reclamation, terracing) and settlement distribution. To this local level, the centralised management acted directly overseeing large-scale infrastructural interventions and indirectly proposing general principles on territorial institutions.

The government’s guidelines, focused on agricultural production and new models of labour organisation, pursued scopes openly unrelated to settlement forms. However, these general principles still marked a profound transformation in the land use structure of villages and rural areas, and the effects of that change endure to the present.

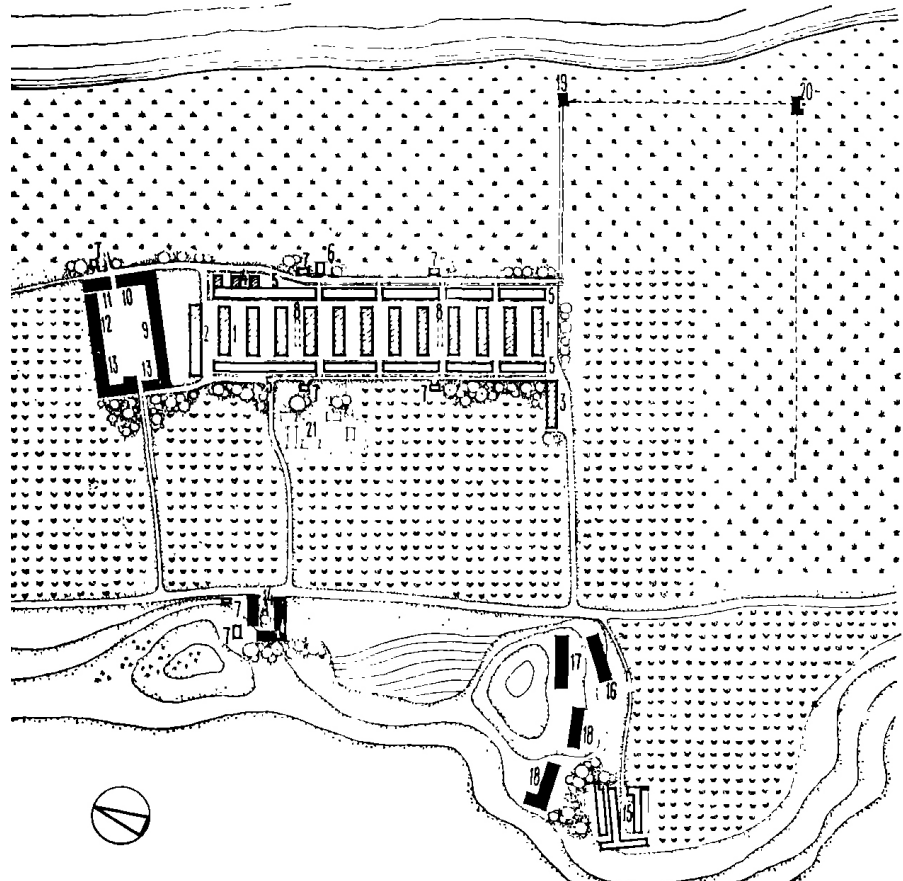
During the 1950s, with the agrarian reform, the communist government established a system of seasonal mutual aid, later replaced by agricultural cooperatives. With the Second Five-Year Plan (1958-1962) and the beginning of the Great Leap Forward in agricultural productivity (1958), the then 740,000 cooperatives merged into some 26,000 people’s communes, involving more than 98 per cent of the country’s 122 million rural households (Knapp 1992). The people’s commune system, based on the collective ownership of land and means of production, was the structural agency of a state in search of a model to overcome the capitalist opposition between the city and the countryside. The system consisted of three different organizational levels, each in charge of activities and services at different scales. The production team counted about 10-50 households (a traditional hamlet dimension) and was the minimum working unit responsible for income redistribution. The brigade consisted of several teams of workers, grouped about 100-200 households (the size of a traditional village), and was in charge of organizing the fields and the factory work. The people’s commune had on average 20-30 brigades (5,000 households) and managed the local construction and infrastructure sector (Strong 1964; Unger 2015). The first interventions that the Party promoted mainly involved hydraulic works of water management and land reclamation. Only later, the reorganization of labour and, in general, the new model of associated life involved spatial standards and settlement layouts, defining new prototypes of housing and industrial centres. From 1956, with the initiative ‘Building a New Socialist Countryside’ (*shèhuì zhǔyì de xīn nóngcūn* 社会主义的新农村), the construction of services was encouraged: public toilets, modern breeding farms, kindergartens, schools, elderly centres. Large dining halls for up to 500 people, dormitories, meeting halls or theatres and exercise camps followed an increase in the military-style organisation. «Large in size and collective in nature» (*yī dà èr gōng* 一大二公) was the only principle defining the design of these facilities.

Fig. 5

Plan of the new village of Hou-zhuang built following the model of Dazhai (Jiànzhú Xuébào, April 1975).

**Fig. 6**

New village of Shangwang brigade (Jiànzhú Xuébào, April 1975).



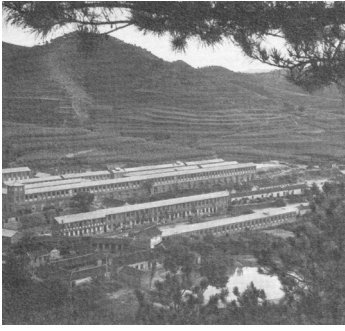


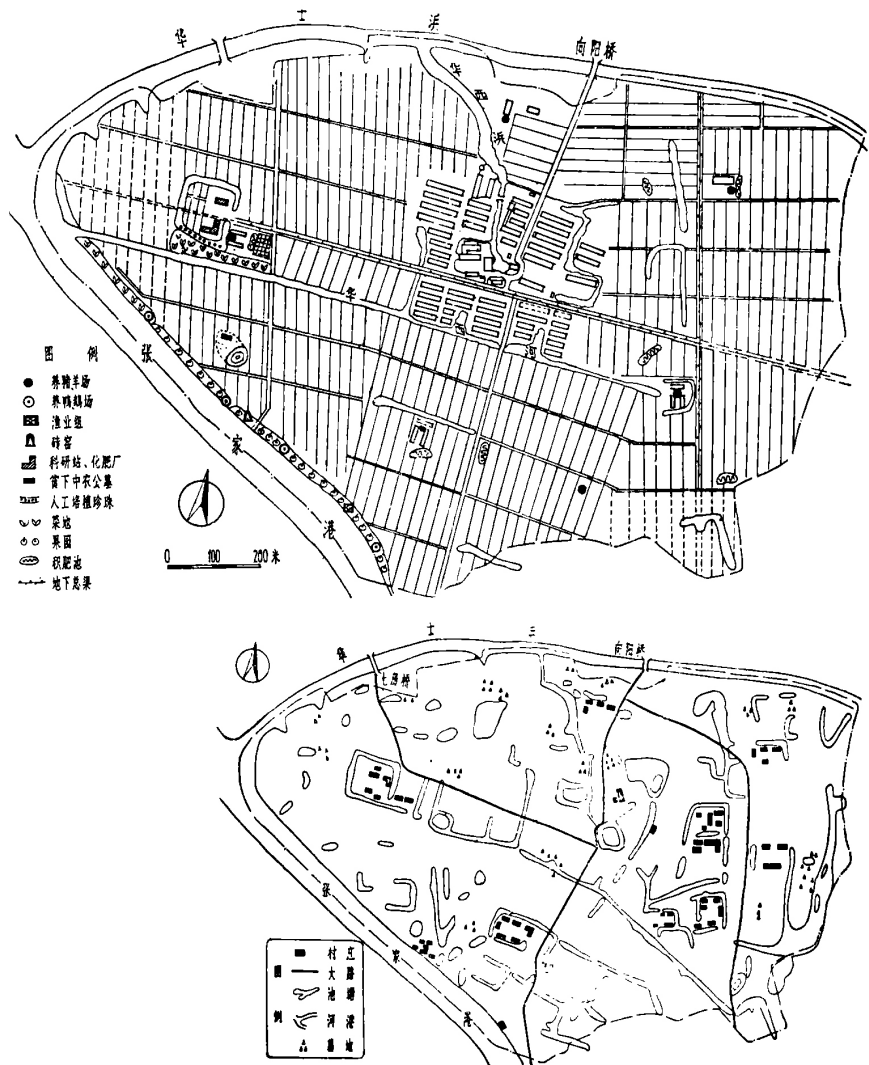
Fig. 7
Panoramic view of Baiyangyu
new village (Spazio e Società, 5
1979).

The break with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s changed territorial policies and urban-rural relations were reformulated according to a strategy of industrial decentralisation and regional autonomy that were described with the Maoist principle: «ruralise the city and urbanise the countryside» (Kao 1963). Beginning in 1963, a year before the start of the Dazhai reconstruction, the annual meeting of the Architectural Society of China warned about the need to consolidate farmland. The principle aimed to improve production efficiency and minimise the consumption of arable land by providing for the demolition and amalgamation of scattered hamlets and villages and the configuration of new settlements that were as compact as possible. The practice, which became a cornerstone of Chinese rural planning, helped shift the focus from agriculture to spatial organisation and settlements. Then, progressively, more and more villages abandoned their original settings in favor of a typically urban layout. The new rural complexes were composed of regular arrays of buildings facing south, set on compact, geometric, often symmetrical or axial layouts, quite similar to the "new workers villages" (*gōngrén xīncūn* 工人新村), the workers' quarters built in the city. Throughout the country, building sizes and types thus recurred with little variation; in rural areas only the materials changed according to region. While in the city the projects that architects drew up included materials such as reinforced concrete or prefabricated elements, in the countryside, the self-sufficiency principle prompted the use of local techniques (rammed earth, adobe, or kiln-dried bricks for walls and load-bearing walls or wooden frames to support the roof). No architect designed the new shape of Dazhai nor the other collectivised villages, and we don't know if educated youth with an architectural background participated in the brigade works with planning tasks. However, at that time, the architect's professional role mainly was seen as a technician at the service of the people who was required to draw up plans and designs previously discussed and defined collectively. New rural settlements were built with the resources from agricultural work, distributing labour-power, expenses, and materials within the brigade. Thus, the modernity of new villages found its expression in the unitary structure of the settlement, collectively defined by its inhabitants, overcoming family clans and rural world's jealousies. Settlements displayed the Maoist vanguard in the compact 'urban' layout, in the regular geometric patterns that rectify terrain roughness, and in the rational juxtaposition of the functional programme that unfolded as precisely as an assembly line. Then, beyond the settlement layout, opened up the new landscape shaped by the people, set to defy the adversities of nature.

The design of new structures and rural settlements rapidly circulated through publications. Since 1954, the official journal of the Architectural Society of China, the *Jiànzhù Xuébào* (建筑学报 – Journal of Architecture) devoted many pages to rural modernisation projects: state farms and breeding farms in the late 1950s, rural housings, dormitories, and dining halls in the early 1960s, and finally, rural settlements, new villages, and brigades during the 1970s. In addition to this contribution, many model experiences were widely conveyed by propaganda publications with photos, drawings, and planning schemes and distributed outside the professional context, both in China and abroad. The Chinese Communist Party has always been very watchful to its international image (De Giorgi 2018) and the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing edited in English a large number of publications regarding peoples' communes.

Fig. 8

Planning scheme of Huaxi brigade and 1963 existing situation (Jiànzhú Xuébào, March 1975).

**Fig. 9**

An original illustration of Dazhai on the cover of Domus 590, January 1979.





Figg. 10-11

Propaganda publications on the Dazhai experience: Tachai, Standard Bearer in China's Agriculture, 1972; Tachai, the Red Banner, 1977, Foreign Language Press, Pechino.

New village plans with precise functional notes were often included on the front pages of brochures, reports, surveys, and books, a detail that emphasise how settlement layout symbolically set, within the specific architectural-urban context, a series of spaces and social functions directly related to the structural choices and needs of the new nation.

After 1979, with Mao's death and the beginning of the economic reform, the country got ready for dramatic changes, once again. The rural administrative structure reverted to pre-1958 patterns, people's communes were replaced by administrative municipalities, and the agricultural system was turned into the household responsibility system based on domestic production (1983). Yet, many mechanisms, devices, principles, and even words today bear traces of the profound transformation that Mao years impressed in the countryside. This legacy is even more evident since when, in the 2000s, the party has focused again on rural issues after decades of urban economic growth. Therefore, the mechanism of model villages has begun to trigger virtuous emulative processes, and the Three Concentrations (*sān gè jízhōng* 三个集中) again have urged to merge scattered villages, concentrate rural factories, and unify field patchwork. Moreover, since 2006, fifty years after Mao's Building a New Socialist Countryside campaign, the slogan has echoed again in the programmes of local administrations, promising to rationalise their territories, widen roads and parking, improve services, lighting and greening public spaces, and building new compact rural communities where the aesthetics of modern suburban districts prevail once again.

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