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Doctoral Dissertation  
Joint Doctoral Program Politecnico di Torino – Tsinghua University  
Curriculum Transnational Architectural models in a globalized world  
(36<sup>th</sup> cycle)

# **Countryside Architecture: A Study on the Academic-Education-Practice Integration Model of Contemporary Chinese Rural Architects**

By

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Politecnico di Torino  
19<sup>th</sup> December 2024

## ABSTRACT

The research is about countryside architecture in contemporary China. It is a study of the academic, education, and practice integration model of contemporary Chinese rural architects, focused on the past two decades. The central hypothesis of this work posits that academic institutions and architectural practices can effectively operate in areas that are in evident need of societal attention, fulfilling a strong educational function as well. By analyzing four case studies of architectural practices in rural China, the thesis examines their academic-education-practice integration models within the framework of renewed attention towards the countryside over the past two decades. Additionally, the thesis examines whether the approach adopted in China can inform the development of an integrated model of academia and practice applicable to countryside revitalization in other geographical contexts, particularly the Italian one. Reevaluating strategies for rural revitalization is a pressing global challenge and a critical topic in international discourse, which, over the past decades has increasingly attracted the attention of governments, institutions, and scholars and where academia and practice can play a pivotal role.

Starting from the observation of the *status quo* of engagement of Italian universities in design practices, the study proceeds with an overview of emerging trends of collaboration between academia, education, and practice globally, covering a gradient of involvement. The research then narrows its focus to the Chinese context within the framework of rural revitalization practices, aiming to reproduce its discourse. Over the past two decades, China has built a solid body of policies and investments in rural areas as a fundamental part of the nation's advancement, thereby attracting the interest and involvement of architects and academic institutions, making it a great testing ground to understand the initial hypothesis of the work. To do so, the thesis examines *four stories* of rural revitalization in contemporary China, combining academia, education, and practice: Li Xiaodong's practice, He Wei Studio/3andwich Design, Xu Tiantian/DnA\_Design and Architecture Studio, and the Rural Revitalization Center of Tsinghua University.

Transitioning the analytical lens from a policy-driven chronological subdivision present in

the existing literature towards an architecture-driven framework, the thesis endeavors to propose a new periodization to position architectural practices as the focal point of the proposed chronological scheme. The research provides a historical overview of three distinct periods: the *pioneering phase* (1949–2003), during which the first basic infrastructures were built in the countryside; the *maturing phase* (2004–2021), marked by specific policies promoted at the national level; and the *consolidating phase* (towards 2049), which foresees the consolidation of the approach to revitalizing the countryside. The study focuses on the phase defined by the author as the *maturing phase*, spanning approximately from 2004 to 2021, which represents two fundamental decades for countryside revitalization in China in terms of policy implementations and architectural production. Starting with a quantitative inventory of architectural projects undertaken in Chinese rural areas over the past two decades, the thesis proceeds with an in-depth qualitative analysis of four stories of rural revitalization.

Altogether, the thesis, in its complexity, documents and describes four stories of the integration of academia, education, and practice in rural revitalization processes which hold significant relevance in contemporary China and contribute to the global discourse. Over the past two decades, China has increasingly dedicated efforts toward the revitalization of rural areas, which, seen within a transnational perspective of exchanges between Italy and China, could be used to inform these practices in different contexts. This study aims to develop a multi-step model addressing the initial hypothesis of the work. First, it creates a framework for a general model with characteristics based on the observed case studies. Next, building on the specificity of these cases within the context of rural revitalization, the research proposes the Polito Rural Hub as an integrated model within Politecnico di Torino tailored to countryside revitalization in Italy. Finally, the study envisions fostering international collaboration through the creation of the Polito | Tsinghua Joint Rural Hub, promoting synergic exchanges between the two leading universities.

**Keywords:** Rural Revitalization; Academic Engagement; Education; Practice Engagement; Integrated model; Rural China.