

Aesthetic Governance and China's Rural Toilet Revolution

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses aesthetic politics in the Chinese rural toilet revolution. Toilet retrofitting is conventionally regarded as an issue of sanitation improvement, but in the emerging trend of rural post-productivism transformation, toilets have become contested sites of aesthetic governance in rural development. Using the case of a village in Northern China, the authors show that, in order to beautify the rural environment, toilet identification, selection, placement and demolition are all directed by aesthetic norms for a beautiful village. Additionally, the aestheticization of village development has legitimized state-led development by creating a common-sense understanding of and imagination for the future. However, aesthetic logics can represent a mismatch with the realities of local lives, resulting in place alienation and suspended development. This article unpacks the logics, mechanisms and spatial-social processes of aesthetic governance in the Chinese toilet revolution.

INTRODUCTION

When we conducted fieldwork in ‘S Village’, we found that toilets were a huge issue. This was not because of how ‘primitive’ the toilets were, but because of how ‘modern’ they were. In 2019, household water-flush toilets had been installed in the village under the national ‘toilet revolution’ project. However, this became a nightmare for villagers: because of water shortages, villagers were reluctant to flush the toilets, and even they were used, the high water consumption of the toilets and the incomplete construction of

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waste treatment systems meant that faeces frequently had to be cleared out of the system by hand. Most importantly, dry latrines on which villagers were heavily dependent were forcibly demolished by the government.

This situation raises many questions about China's rural toilet revolution. Why would a village which was short of water still be required to install water-flush toilets? Why must the dry latrines be demolished? To address these questions, this article explores the logic and mechanisms underlying the toilet revolution. Rural household toilet retrofitting has been gradually implemented in China over many years, but in 2015, President Xi Jinping himself proposed the 'Rural Toilet Revolution' (RTR), and toilet retrofitting developed into a large-scale campaign which swept across the country. The state mobilized the entire administrative system to enforce the project and invested large amounts in subsidies. According to official statistics, sanitary toilet coverage reached 68 per cent by the end of 2020, with a total of 40 million household toilets being retrofitted.¹

S Village is part of this pattern. Our case study of S Village leads us to argue that the most influential rationale behind RTR is not conventional sanitation improvement, but aesthetic governance. In the state agenda, RTR was placed within a broader policy framework, the Rural Living Environment Improvement Initiative (RLEII) (Zhang et al., 2023), and the toilet issue became part of the rural spatial reordering process, especially for villages undergoing the state-promoted 'Beautiful Village' (BV) process. For S Village, beautifying the environment was regarded as an overarching principle for decision making, and both the building of indoor water-flush toilets and the demolition of outdoor dry latrines were aimed at meeting the BV aesthetic norm. But this aesthetic logic collided with the living logic of residents, and it was this conflict that created the stir over toilets in S Village.

In this article, we situate the Chinese RTR within aesthetic politics. The aesthetics of space has conventionally been the territory of urban studies, such as urban planning (e.g., Gerlofs, 2017; O'Neill, 2009), middle-class communities (e.g. Montefrio et al., 2021; Pow, 2018), slum clearance (e.g. Ghertner, 2015) and touristification (e.g. Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2021; Oh, 2022). Major studies about toilets have tended to frame them within sanitation and take their hygienic role for granted (e.g. Engel and Susilo, 2014; Li et al., 2021). However, the toilet as a political domain for spatial aesthetics has received little attention.

1. The official statistics are inconsistent. According to *China Health and Family Planning Statistical Yearbook 2016*, the sanitary toilet coverage rate increased from 7.5 per cent in 1993 to 78.5 per cent in 2015 (see Cheng et al., 2018). In official news after 2018, the coverage rate was reported to have reached 68 per cent by the end of 2020, and subsequent news articles referred to the time range 'since RLEII [the Rural Living Environment Improvement Initiative] was implemented from 2018 and onward' (Yu, 2021). We posit that the statistical measure changed after 2018, and therefore we use the latest official statistics.

In the past two decades, many Chinese villages have been experiencing a 'post-productivism' transition, characterized by three major changes: a shift from agro-centric production to diversification activities; the increasing transformation of rural areas into consumption sites; and policies that emphasize the environment (Smith, 2021; Woods, 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). Within this trend, 'village appearance' (*cunrong cunmao*) has become increasingly crucial in the rural development agenda, and toilets, as spaces, are regarded by the government as an important means to reorder and govern the rural environment. These changes open up a spatial perspective for examining the toilet beyond the hygiene framework. As Deng Qi-yao found, in contemporary rural China, 'private space such as toilets' has been 'publicized' as 'socially controlled space' (Deng, 2020: 141). With increasing weight placed on rural environmental concerns, the toilet revolution reflects the growing significance of aesthetic governance in contemporary rural development. Thus, we place China's toilet revolution within the context of the rural post-productivism transformation, enabling us to capture the entanglement between daily life spaces and broader rural development mediated by aesthetics. By using China's RTR as a lens, we aim to explore how aesthetic governance is exercised, how it affects the rural environment, and how this process can contribute to rethinking development.

This article draws on our fieldwork in S Village, in Henan Province of China. The research team began observing this village in 2015; the empirical data on the toilet revolution are based on our fieldwork from 2019 to 2021. During this period, the first author lived in the village over six months, carrying out ethnographic research using participant observation, interviews and document analysis. The text is structured as follows: after a discussion of aesthetic governance, we turn to a historical review of how rural toilets were integrated into the Chinese development agenda. We then present an empirical case of how the 'beautiful village aesthetic' shaped the toilet revolution. In our case study, aesthetic requirements played a key role throughout the whole process, from the decision to build water-flush toilets to the demolition of the dry latrines. The repercussions in the village that were caused by the elimination of dry latrines became our initial motivation to delve into the whole story of the toilet revolution. In the last two sections, we examine the internal logics of this case, and analyse how the aestheticization of the toilet has produced an alienated space in the village and resulted in suspended development.

AESTHETIC GOVERNANCE

Aesthetics, space and politics are inextricably connected and mutually constitutive (Dikeç, 2015; Rancière, 2013). As Dikeç (2015) argues, the aesthetic orientation of space renders space political rather than merely an artistic matter, due to the communicative commonalities of aesthetics.

Ranci ere (2013: 32) elaborates by addressing the common sensibility that aesthetics generates: ‘I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. [It] therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts’. In other words, aesthetics can create a ‘common sensibility’ among people without demanding logic, cognition and knowledge (Dike , 2015), such as feelings of promise and desire stimulated by infrastructure (Larkin, 2013). This innate attribute of aesthetics is often manipulated by those in power for the purposes of governance (O’Neill, 2009), especially in the visual spatial expression of power (Lefebvre, 1991).

In studying American cities, Jean Jacobs has criticized the ‘orthodox’ urban planning and design which saw cities from a ‘distant view’ and put scientific knowledge and artistic aesthetics over real, lively and intricate human interactions, thereby effacing the diversity of city life (Jacobs, 1992). Similarly, as James Scott points out, making a society ‘legible’ is the immanent desire of the state because this ‘administratively more convenient format’ (Scott, 1998: 23) could provide access for governance and strengthen state capacity for social engineering. Scott describes this as ‘visual regimentation’, in which a designed and unified aesthetic view of order from above is imposed on and regulates complicated living social orders (ibid.: 217). When the designers of social engineering, referred to by Scott as ‘high modernists’, encountered obstacles in reality, they tended to retreat to the ‘miniaturization of perfection’: ‘the creation of a more easily controlled micro-order in model cities, model villages, and model farms’ (ibid: 25). Jacobs and Scott thus identify one core motivation of aesthetic governance: to reconfigure society and transform spaces considered underdeveloped and ungovernable into state spaces from the perspective of the ruling body.

Aesthetics underpins the spatialization of power not only because it provides a mechanism through which power reorders society, but also because the attributes of aesthetics can smooth the exercise of power. D. Asher Ghertner (2015) calls the affinity of aesthetic attributes and governance ‘aesthetic governmentality’. In contrast to top-down administrative coercion, aesthetics has an advantage for governance: the ‘beautiful’ visual order offers a ‘soft’ way for power to garner acceptance and recognition, and thereby secure legitimacy.

Recent scholarly works have illuminated a number of characteristics of aesthetic governmentalities. Firstly, they form a general normativity. In a study of how Delhi became a world-class city, Ghertner (2015) finds that an aesthetic normativity and codes of appearance of world-class aesthetics became the dominant rule in envisioning the future, identifying order and directing action. The normative framework, according to Ghertner (ibid.: 127), implies the application of standardized aesthetic codes for ordering

things and separating what is good and what is bad. Moreover, this aesthetic regime 'offers a particular viewing disposition, sensory vocabulary, and set of expressive material' (ibid.), and also delimits the denied alternatives. Under this vision, any divergence from the dominant aesthetic rule, such as slums, are considered a nuisance or unsightly and need to be removed to achieve a beautiful city future. These exclusionary and violent aspects of aesthetic governance have, for example, led to the eviction of informal settlements in Mexico (Lombard, 2014), and the zero-tolerance stance on graffiti in Oslo (Arnold, 2019) and San Francisco (Shobe and Banis, 2014).

The second characteristic of aesthetic governmentalities is that they nurture 'a community of sense' and thus legitimize governance (Pow, 2018; Rancière, 2013). Like Ghertner's world-class aesthetic regime in Delhi, Pow (2018) finds that green city projects initiated by Chinese environmental governance were intended to nurture an ecological 'community of sense' by aestheticizing the urban environment. By creating a highly aestheticized green façade in everyday sensory experiences, such as clean streets and fake leaves, the eco-city 'is staged to convince people of the benefits of going green while outlining a sustainable urban vision' (Pow, 2018: 874). In this way, this 'common sense' legitimizes governmental intervention and promotes the state's vision of a harmonious society.

The third characteristic is that aesthetic governmentalities sideline techno-scientific modalities. In the case of Delhi, Ghertner (2015) suggests that, because of the dominance of aesthetic rule, techno-scientific instruments such as surveys, cartography and statistics were lacking in the operations of making a 'new' Delhi. In some situations, technologies have been deployed to meet aesthetic standards. Jesse Rodenbiker (2022) uses the term 'aesthetic state' to describe the tendency of the Chinese state to solve environment problems by deploying geo-engineering to beautify the natural world (for instance, the so-called Blue Sky policy) in order to achieve the 'ecological sublime'.

Recent literature has revealed that this aesthetic governance is problematic. In addition to stifling the diversity of life, as noted by Jacobs, a certain aesthetic appearance is often achieved at the expense of other social and/or environment costs. In Pow's eco-city, the clean technology system relies on pollutive industries around the city; thus, 'maintaining the "beauty" of the eco-city often relies on externalizing the environmental cost elsewhere' (Pow, 2018: 877). Moreover, beneath the 'soft' surface of aesthetic governance lurk internal contradictions and dissent. Although slum dwellers have internalized the normative regulation of the world-class aesthetic, Ghertner (2015) argues that they denounced the city's future vision, conditional as it was on their exclusion and loss of material interest. Likewise, Pow (2018: 879) finds that residents of the eco-city tend to recast eco-aesthetic meanings in more pragmatic ways, beyond the ecological environment. Based on these negative attitudes and indifference from citizenry,

Ghertner and Pow argue that the aesthetic regime is not hegemonic because real consent is lacking.

We take this one step further and argue that the cultural hegemony of aesthetics is exercised in the production of rural space for development. For Gramsci (2000), cultural hegemony occurs when the dominant groups deploy values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments and prejudices to define the ruling institutions and legitimize their authority. In the case of the toilet revolution, we will demonstrate that despite residents' resistance, they still consented to the aesthetic norms of the village, and even aspired to the development project. What they resisted was the incomplete 'technical device' in the development apparatus (Escobar, 2012: 91) rather than the aesthetic regime itself. As our case study will show, the process of aestheticization marginalizes techno-scientific considerations and ignores human experience, resulting in the villagers' disastrous experience.

FROM HYGIENE TO ENVIRONMENT: INTEGRATING THE TOILET INTO THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The state's will to improve the toilet has been bound up with China's modernization process since Westerners brought 'hygiene' (*weisheng*) as a modern concept in the late 19th century (Rogaski, 2004). Chinese modernizers saw sanitation and hygiene as an indicator of modernity and progress and anticipated using these concepts to transform the Chinese into 'civilized new citizens of a modern nation' (Zhou, 2019: 51). Ruth Rogaski (2004) has called this persistent association between hygiene and modernization projects 'hygienic modernity'. Modernizing society through hygiene continued to serve the state's development plan after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

In the early years of the PRC, to address threats of 'germ warfare' from Western countries while constructing a new socialist society, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated the nation-wide Patriotic Hygiene Campaign to mobilize society to fight disease. In areas with high infectious disease prevalence, the government strengthened the management of water and human faeces and replaced open manure pits with biogas toilets (Zhou, 2019). The most influential achievement in this period was establishing the National Patriotic Health Campaign Committee (NPHCC) in the 1950s, which would play a leading role in toilet, water and sanitation affairs in the following decades (Cheng et al., 2018; Zhou, 2019). After the introduction of Open and Reform in the late 1970s, 'development' in place of socialist ideology became the country's dominant principle. As integrating into the international development orbit became the urgent task of the Chinese government, the United Nations' development agenda became the quintessential reference for China's hygienic modernization. For example, the UN partnered with NPHCC to initiate a rural toilet retrofitting project in low-income western regions from 1996 to 2000 (Cheng et al., 2018).

Rural toilet retrofitting regularly appeared in national rural sanitation improvement plans and notices initiated by the NPHCC, with the state consistently increasing public subsidies. According to national statistics, from 2004 to 2013, the central government invested a total of RMB 8.27 billion into rural toilet retrofitting (Zhou, 2019: 118).² The achievements during this period are impressive: from 1993 to 2015, sanitary toilet³ coverage rose from 7.5 per cent to 57.5 per cent (Cheng et al., 2018); from 2009 to 2011, infectious disease rates in rural areas dropped from 37.5/100,000 to 22.2/100,000 (Zhou, 2019: 143).

A new wave of rural toilet retrofitting was given impetus in 2015. In July that year, during a village visit, President Xi stated that as agriculture modernization had made great progress, new village construction should continue this trend with a 'toilet revolution', providing sanitary toilets for villagers to enhance life quality (Zhou, 2019). After this 'special instruction' from President Xi, the Chinese term in official documents and media for toilet retrofitting changed from 'gai ce' ('improve toilets') to 'cesuo geming' ('toilet revolution'). The toilet revolution was intended to 'solve the problem once and for all' (Wang, 2020). In 2016, the State Council set the goal of complete (100 per cent) sanitary toilet coverage in rural areas across China by 2030, after the NPHCC had proposed the goal of 85 per cent by 2020 one year previously (Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2020). A nation-wide rural toilet revolution campaign had begun.

In the Xi-initiated toilet revolution, some changes are worth noting. In addition to increased state investment and intensified enforcement (Wang, 2020), the issue of rural toilet retrofitting was also reframed. In previous endeavours, most work around improving rural toilets had been conducted in the name of hygiene and sanitation, whereas in the toilet revolution, most official documents set the goal as 'enhancing life quality' and environmental improvement. In 2017, the central government initiated the national rural development strategy, Rural Revitalization, with five goals of rural development: thriving industry (*chanye xingwang*), an ecologically sound living environment (*shengtai yiju*), a civilized social atmosphere (*xiangfeng wenming*), effective governance (*zhili youxiao*), and enriched life (*shenghuo fuyu*). The toilet revolution was framed under the objective of an ecologically sound living environment. Ensuing state plans and directives recognized the toilet revolution as crucial to rural living environmental governance and juxtaposed it with environmental issues such as pollution

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2. If we apply current exchange rates (March 2024), this would be equivalent to around US\$ 1.15 billion. However, this does not take account of fluctuating exchange rates over the period in question.
 3. In Chinese official documents and media, the terms 'sanitary toilet', 'harmless toilet' and 'harmless sanitary toilet' are often used interchangeably. 'Harmless' (*wugonghai*) means that the toilet has no/low risk of public disease transmission. Nowadays, 'sanitary toilet' is more common; to avoid confusion, that is the term we use here.

and waste treatment. Meanwhile, toilet retrofitting faded from sanitation and public health affairs in official discourse and policy frameworks.

This reclassification of rural toilets was also apparent in institutional rearrangements. Responsibility for rural toilet affairs shifted from the NPHCC to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. Construction-related departments, such as the Ministry of Housing and Urban–Rural Development, became more influential. Additionally, many other departments, such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, became involved in supporting toilet revolution affairs. Overseeing these departments, the central government’s Central Rural Affairs Leading Small Groups is the decision maker, with the NPHCC serving a minor supporting role (State Council, 2018). This structure was duplicated at local levels and became a powerful executive force behind the toilet revolution.

The recalibration of the state agenda and the reconsolidation of government resources for toilet retrofitting highlight the official interpretation of toilet retrofitting as an environmental issue involving rural development. The changes also align with the burgeoning significance of environment construction in China’s development strategy in recent decades (Hansen et al., 2018; Pow, 2018). Given that improvement of the rural living environment is a crucial part of this environmental governance landscape, we can clearly see the resonance with post-productivism which is characterized by environment-oriented policies. It is this ‘environment turn’ in the approach to toilet retrofitting that constituted the backdrop of S Village’s toilet revolution. We turn now to the case of S Village and examine the impacts of these shifts.

THE TOILET REVOLUTION IN A ‘BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE’

S Village, administered under Township D, County F and City Z, is located in hilly terrain in Northern China’s Henan Province. Around 300 households comprising 1,500 villagers living in 10 hamlets are scattered across the village’s valleys and hillsides. Since the late 1980s, the livelihoods of most households have gradually shifted from agricultural production to diverse income-generating activities. Around 2003, village cadres applied the policy of ‘conversion of cropland to forest’ and promoted afforestation, releasing all villagers from farming responsibilities. Because of the forest coverage, the provincial government identified this area as ‘Forest Park X’ in 2005; since then, the younger generations have left the village to seek employment elsewhere, and S Village has become a typical ‘hollow village’ populated mainly by left-behind groups. Facing stagnation, village cadres looked for ways to develop the village. In 2014, the opportunity arose: when village cadres heard that a neighbouring village had applied for the state-funded Beautiful Village (BV) initiative, they decided to follow suit.

BV is a national rural development project initiated in 2013, with the aim of improving the rural environment and developing rural tourism, thus promoting local economies. These objectives were encompassed by the project's propaganda slogan, 'good for living, good for tourism, good for the economy' (*yiju, yiyou, yiye*). Certificated BV demonstration villages could be earmarked for government funding to improve the village environment. Meanwhile, the central government provided an exemplar BV for all villages across the country: Anji in Zhejiang province. Zhejiang is one of the most developed regions in China, and Anji was the first village to initiate BV. The central government lauded Zhejiang's successful rural development and called on other locales to learn from it. In Henan, Zhejiang was regarded as the model for rural development, and local cadres were sent on visiting tours of Zhejiang villages. It could be said that the Zhejiang model provided a miniaturized ideal type of the state's vision of a modern Chinese village. We are offered a glimpse of the ideal image through excerpts from reports by two journalists about Lujia Village in Anji.

'Lujia Village ranked near the bottom of the health assessment of 187 villages throughout the county in 2010, which made environmental improvement imminent', Mr Zhu, the village committee Party secretary said. Guided by the 'Thousand Village Demonstration, Ten Thousand Village Renovation' project in Zhejiang, the village committee tore down simple latrines, cleared the watercourse, and installed tap water for villagers. (Chai et al., 2020)

Stepping into Lujia Village in Anji, Zhejiang, yards are clean and tidy, surrounded by green trees and mountains. A winding cement road leads to the door of every house, each covered with white walls and black tiles, and the earth-yellow enclosing wall encircles the buildings — everything forms a picturesque scene. (Liu, 2018)

'Clean', 'decorated' and 'a picturesque scene' in the Zhejiang model form the visual code and aesthetic norm for a beautiful village, demarcating what is beautiful, and demonstrating a possible future.

In 2016, S Village was certificated as a BV demonstration village and was allocated RMB 27 million for village environmental renewal. It then embarked on the journey of constructing a 'Beautiful Village'. Around the same time, to improve the environment, City Z allocated RMB 300 million to reconstruct Forest Park X with the intention of developing it as a scenic destination, combining ecological restoration and tourism development. Improvements to S Village were planned within the scenic scope of the Forest Park. These two state-funded projects rendered S Village the 'Star Village' in Township D. This inflow of resources excited the villagers. They anticipated that the declining village would have a new future and all villagers would share the opportunities afforded by tourism development.

While the criteria for state projects required villages to apply from below, once an application was approved, the village's development was integrated into China's national 'development apparatus' — an alliance of bureaucratic systems, professional knowledge and private capital. The Township D government, as the representative of the state, was tasked with managing the

projects, hiring a design firm from Shanghai to redesign the village space and contracting a construction company for the building work. This collaboration between the government, the design firm and the construction company dominated the decision-making process as the village gradually became the manifestation of their conceived space.

The plan of the two projects was to preserve the residential area but refurbish the façades of all the houses. The township authority, as project manager and client of the design company, proposed its ideal type: the Zhejiang model. Local cadres said, ‘Look at those beautiful villages in other places, they all look like this. It is good-looking (*haokan*)’.⁴ ‘As good-looking as Zhejiang’s village’ became the benchmark of village appearance renovation. The design company designed white walls and grey tiles for all houses, a style common in Southern China, even though S Village is a Northern village. After the design was finished in 2017, it was displayed in public areas. The plan offered a new imagination through which villagers could conceive their community, offering the ‘feeling of promise’ of developmental projects. Work soon began, painting the old grey walls white, and replacing the old red tiles with grey tiles.

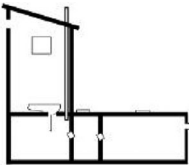
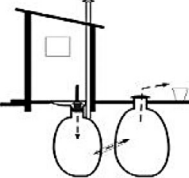
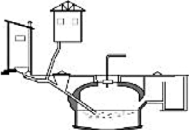
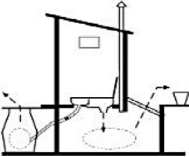
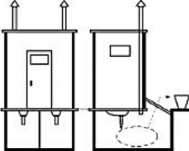
By 2019, around half of the villagers’ houses had been painted in the standard Zhejiang style, and the remaining houses would be painted over the next two years, phase by phase. In that year, another state project reached S Village: the toilet revolution. It was an RLEII subproject launched by the central government, and when it arrived in S Village, the village beautification project was already underway. When BV and the toilet revolution project intersected in one locale, their interweaving generated complex processes and consequences.

THE TOILET AS PART OF A VISUAL AESTHETIC: IT MUST BE BEAUTIFUL OR INVISIBLE

Technically, ‘toilet retrofitting’ does not mean replacing dry latrines with water-flush toilets, but replacing unsanitary toilets with sanitary toilets. A ‘sanitary’ toilet system can be either water-flush or waterless/dry, with the latter more suitable for rural areas (Hu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2019). In official documents pertaining to the Chinese toilet revolution, the terminology for describing the goal of toilet retrofitting is ‘sanitary toilets’ (*weisheng cesuo*) or ‘innocuous sanitary/harmless toilets’ (*wuhaihua cesuo*), not water-flush toilets specifically. One document on national standards, the ‘GB National Hygienic Specification for Rural Household Latrines’ (hereafter referred to as the ‘National Standards’; see National Health Commission and Standardization Administration, 2012) lists six types of sanitary/harmless toilets (see Table 1). Five

4. Interview, Village Party Secretary of S Village, 22 June 2021.

Table 1. Sanitary Toilet Types in National Standards, China

Type of toilet	Water/dry	Characteristics	Sketch
Three-chamber-storage	Waterless	Composed of three chambers, suitable for areas with high groundwater levels or shallow permafrost layers. Three chambers with capacity of 7.3 m ³ can temporarily store and treat human waste for 60 days, prior to further treatment or conveyance.	
Double-vault storage	Waterless	Comprised of a funnel acceptor, a front urn installed indoors and a back urn installed outdoors. Little water (2L per person/day in Northern China) is used after discharging.	
Biogas	Dry/waterless	This toilet is built in concert with livestock. Human and animal waste along with some water pass through a conduit into the biogas reactor, and the biogas can be used as a household fuel.	
Urine-faeces separation	Waterless	Urine is channelled into the front drain and faeces are dropped into the faecal pit. Urine can be used as fertilizer and faeces are dehydrated for safe treatment.	
Double-pit alternating	Dry/waterless	Has two pits that are used alternately. When one is full, it is sealed up with soil and the other one is put into use.	
Integrated water-flush	Water	This toilet requires a constant source of water, and a complete treatment and conveyance system. Toilet wastewater is discharged into the sewer system and treated together with other domestic wastewater by onsite facilities or municipal plant. Around 3L of water (or more) per flush is used.	N/A

Note regarding sources: This table is based on 'GB National Hygienic Specification for Rural Household Latrines (GB19379-2012)' (National Health Commission and Standardization Administration, 2012). Since this official document lacks English descriptions and sketches, the names, characteristics, and sketches in the Table have been supplemented by referencing other sources, including (in English) Cheng et al. (2018), Hu et al. (2016), Li et al. (2021) and Tilley et al. (2014), and (in Chinese) Zhang et al. (2021). The authors have consolidated all the gathered information into this Table. We would like to express our special gratitude to Professor Bin Fan for granting us permission to use the sketches from his team's articles. Prof. Fan went above and beyond by also assisting in revising other textual information in the Table. We are truly grateful for his expertise and kindness.

types — three-chamber- storage toilet, double-vault storage toilet, double-pit alternating storage toilet, urine separation toilet and biogas toilet — depend on a waterless/dry system, while only integrated water-flush models require a water system. The water-flush model is most suitable for Southern China, with its plentiful rainfall, and for wealthy areas with sewer pipeline networks (Cheng et al., 2018). If a village converts unsanitary toilets to any of the six types of sanitary toilet, it is consistent with national standards.

The 2019 toilet revolution plan for S Village entailed the installation of water-flush toilets with three-chamber storage. This implies that the user interface is a water-flush toilet but rather than waste being directly flushed into a fully fledged sewerage system, a three-chamber system is used to store the waste for a certain period. It is a simplified water-flush toilet but still requires sewage pipes for the eventual transfer of the waste (Hu et al., 2016; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). The population of S Village had experienced state-promoted toilet retrofitting twice before. The first wave had been in the 1990s, when the simplest dry latrines were replaced by the double-vault storage system. Around 2012, the double-vault toilets were upgraded to biogas toilets. Both toilet types are included in the national standards list as sanitary toilets (Table 1). With improving economic conditions in recent years, few primitive dry latrines remained in S Village: it could be said that S Village had achieved the ubiquity of sanitary toilets. Yet, the third round of upgrading still came. Previous retrofitting programmes had been intended to replace unsanitary toilets with sanitary ones, but the aim of the third toilet revolution was to replace all dry latrines with water-flush toilets. This decision was intertwined with the BV project.

Around 2019, City Z was promoting ‘high-quality development’. When the toilet revolution came, the municipality directly equated high quality with water-flush toilets. This determination encouraged County F to mandate water-flush toilets and to decree: no water-flush toilets, no subsidies. County F assigned a quota of 4,000 toilets to Township D; Township D in turn selected 10 villages for this project. S Village was initially not one of those chosen, since villages that already had sewerage systems — enabling the use of water-flush toilets — were prioritized. However, when township leaders visited S Village to examine BV construction, the head cadre decided to include S Village in the 2019 toilet revolution plan: how could it be a beautiful village without water-flush toilets? However, one issue needed to be addressed: the subsidies for toilet retrofitting covered actual toilet facilities only, and not the sewerage system. Township leaders solved this problem by integrating this with other development projects: the Forest Park project took over the sewerage system construction. The project designer and construction contractor concurred with this plan since tourist areas also needed toilets. It seemed like the perfect solution. The toilet revolution finally reached S Village.

Here, however, the project encountered resistance from villagers. Their reasons varied. The location requirement of water-flush toilets constituted

the first problem: according to the policy, the water-flush toilet must be installed indoors or in a courtyard. The National Standards explained that this was for convenient use and management (National Health Commission and Standardization Administration, 2012). A guidebook drawn up by County F gave more detail: 'The toilet should be built in the courtyard or indoors. Toilets along roads must be relocated to indoor sites. Otherwise, no subsidy will be granted'.⁵ This requirement thus makes a clear distinction between water-flush systems and dry systems — that is, whether they are indoors or outdoors. Although waterless/dry sanitary toilets meet the sanitation standards, their location does not meet the visual order of BV, as they are often built outside of a courtyard. Moreover, dry latrines had less stringent requirements regarding appearance, and most were built with red bricks. If we revisit the aesthetic description of the Zhejiang model, with its white walls and grey tiles, we may feel the discordance of dry toilets in the image of a Beautiful Village. By contrast, the indoor requirements of water-flush toilets can guarantee a unified visual order, as toilets are invisible in this picture. For the authorities, the aesthetic norm of BV was expected to homogenize all village space and reorder the environment.

However, this aesthetic norm was not the villagers' cause for concern over the new toilets. Indoor toilets were difficult for many households because not every courtyard had space for a separate bathroom. As villagers preferred to place malodorous facilities outside the courtyard, they had over the years maintained the practice of building latrines outside or next to the courtyard. Additionally, dry latrines only needed the labour of cleaning out faeces once a year, but once water-flush toilets were installed without a complete sewerage system, this unpleasant task needed to be done more frequently. Moreover, due to water shortages, using clean water to flush toilets seemed wasteful to villagers. Outdoor latrines had legally and functionally served their purpose in villagers' lives, and, in many ways, water-flush toilets were not compatible with local life.

In the face of this situation, village cadres, as the final implementers of the toilet revolution, deployed several adaptive strategies. The first was allowing villagers to keep their dry latrines. In the 2019 policy, the focus of the authorities was just on building water-flush toilets, without requiring the demolition of dry latrines. This left an alternative for villagers, who could use the different toilet types according to need. The second strategy was to 'beautify' outdoor toilets. Villager Wen's toilet was a typical example. Local cadres converted the outdoor dry latrine into a water-flush toilet on its original site but decorated the outside of the toilet consistent with BV standards, painting its wall with white lime. They also built a white brick screening wall in front of the toilet with a semi-circular door and covered

5. The authors collected this guidebook from one S Village cadre who was responsible for toilet revolution policy implementation at that time. This cadre provided the guidebook and shared related information in an interview, 4 July 2021.

the top with grey tiles. From a distance, the building was nice-looking and conformed to BV aesthetics. (See Supporting Information Photo S1 in the online article.)

By spring 2020, 240 households in S Village had installed water-flush toilets. Benefiting from ‘adaptive strategies’ at the grassroots level, the villagers could maintain normal daily life. Some still used dry latrines and left their water-flush toilet unused; some used the two types of toilets alternately. Everyday routines and aesthetic space arrangements co-existed in a hybrid status. But this situation flummoxed the government. In governmental logic and administrative procedure, toilet retrofitting was complete and dry latrines had been eliminated from this beautiful image. When the higher-level leaders saw the hybrid space, a storm erupted.

ZERO TOLERANCE OF BUHAOKAN (UNSIGHTLINESS): ELIMINATING DRY LATRINES

After the sewerage system was integrated into the Forest Park construction project, the construction team dug a ditch in the road for a sewerage pipe, leaving the road partially open for traffic. However, a Forest Park funding shortfall led to the suspension of work to install the sewer, leaving villagers with an empty ditch and half a road. The villagers had to bear the inconvenience, hoping the sewerage network would be installed as soon as possible. However, what came next was not the sewerage network, but an angry vice mayor.

In March 2021, the vice mayor and the head of the Agriculture and Rural Affairs bureau of City Z secretly visited S Village to examine the BV construction. The vice mayor was angered by S Village’s ‘dirty, messy, worse’ (*zang luan cha*)⁶ environment and ordered local cadres to deal with it. The Village Party Secretary held a village assembly and demanded that S Village’s dirty environment — waste everywhere, trash overflowing from bins, and dry latrines on the roadside — be improved, because S Village was a BV demonstration village. In the classification used by local authorities, dry latrines were considered *buhaokan* (unsightly) and part of a dirty and messy environment. In his 10-minute speech, the Party Secretary mentioned ‘Beautiful Village’ five times. He asked, ‘How can a Beautiful Village have dry latrines?’⁷

Since a sound village environment had become a national strategy goal, village appearance had become a buzzword among officials. From the state’s perspective, dry latrines are a blot on the unified village appearance, and thus go against the BV order. The descriptions of Lujia Village cited above reveal that the first measures of village ‘improvement’ were the removal of

6. First author’s fieldnotes, 15 March 2021.

7. Ibid.

dry latrines. In S Village, the adaptative strategies of grassroots cadres kept the contradiction between the visual order from above and the living order from below in balance, for a while. The temporary compromise changed once it had been 'seen' by outsiders: 'being seen' by the vice mayor had destroyed this balance.

One month later, village leaders attended a meeting in the town where they were issued a central government directive to 'eliminate dry latrines to zero' (*hance qingling*). The township government stipulated a deadline of 30 April 2021, and specifically called on the BV demonstration village to remove all dry latrines. Returning to S Village, the leaders organized a village committee meeting to announce the policy. Although cadres knew that removing dry latrines would provoke villagers' resistance, the deadline left them no choice. The storm had finally arrived. The next day, an action team consisting of all village cadres and some helpers, armed with hoes, was divided into three smaller teams, checking each house in the village. Their task was clear: tear down any outdoor dry latrines.

This clearance action encountered more fierce resistance by villagers than the water-flush toilet installation. Two factors provoked villagers' anger and opposition. The first was the incomplete sewerage system. In the absence of such a system, the water-flush toilet could not be used properly. For villagers, installing a water-flush toilet meant adding an extra facility in their homes, but they still had dry latrines as an alternative. But eliminating dry latrines meant depriving them of their last resort and the necessity for daily life. The second factor was the incomplete status of 'being beautiful'. The BV painting work progressed gradually, stage by stage, and at this point around half the houses remained unpainted. This group of villagers argued fiercely with village cadres, asking: 'Why haven't you painted our houses yet, but you're demolishing our toilets first?'.⁸ Some villagers directly rebuked the village cadres or refused them entry when the action team came to their house. An old lady locked herself in her toilet and refused to budge, and the action team eventually had to leave after a protracted attempt at persuasion proved fruitless.

In the face of fierce resistance, village cadres were unwilling to enact tough measures because they knew that most households still depended on dry latrines. They tried to convince the villagers that both BV and Forest Park required a pleasant environment which would benefit the village in the long run, also emphasizing that it was an inevitable trend, as the decision had come from President Xi. They had some success. Some villagers who had been opposed at first complied after various means of persuasion; some villagers adopted 'buffering tactics', claiming 'I will do it myself, very soon'.⁹

After three intense rounds of actions to remove the dry latrines, piles of brick fragments were scattered across the village, although the clearance

8. First author's fieldnotes, 15 April 2021.

9. First author's fieldnotes, 23 June 2021, based on villagers' conversation and memories.

was incomplete. Gradually, the storm abated. During the first two days of action, the township urged the reporting of daily clearance numbers, but later on, the higher-level leaders no longer pushed the deadline. After the storm had died down, some villagers started rebuilding their dry latrines in secret, using plastic boards as temporary walls. With no pressure from above, village cadres turned a blind eye and no longer intervened. Grassroots tactics had restored the balance once again, but no one felt safe. Concern hung over villagers' heads like the sword of Damocles: when will the next storm come?

After this event, we checked the official records and found that the term 'eliminating dry latrines to zero' had never appeared in any national gazette, notice or propaganda. However, trawling China's largest internet search engine revealed over a million news items about clearance action throughout China, mostly published by local media outlets. It is difficult to verify whether the central government had issued these instructions covertly. In the case of S Village, local cadres had referred to 'the policy from the central government' to justify their actions.

To some extent, issues with policy execution, such as campaign-like implementation (e.g. Zeng, 2020), can explain the conflicts between the toilet policy and villagers. But these explanations cannot account for the underlying drive behind the regional government's decision to enforce toilet change. Some studies argue that local cadres and contractors are only interested in obtaining subsidies and have little interest in the quality of projects (e.g., Li, 2018). Such findings throw some light on the problems of the toilet revolution, but fail to explain the case of S village. Subsidies for building water-flush toilets amounted to only RMB 2,600 per household, and the meagre profits made it hard for local cadres to find contractors. The village cadres eventually asked for help from relatives to get the project underway. Moreover, demolishing dry latrines was a political task which did not entail any subsidies. There was just one reason for this task: dry latrines are *buhaokan*. The kind of institutional problems identified in some studies may be the cause of policy failure in many cases, but in our case — the toilet revolution in a Beautiful Village — the power of aesthetics running through the process cannot be overlooked. This case thus explicitly presents an alternative logic undergirding the decision to enact a toilet revolution.

THE HEGEMONIC AESTHETICIZATION OF TOILETS

The case of S Village reveals BV's overarching and determining role in the toilet revolution. As the 'miniaturization of perfection' (Scott, 1998), BV epitomized Chinese developers' imagination and vision for Chinese villages. Packaging the village into a tourist destination aligned state aspirations to transform and govern the 'backward', 'unruly' countryside.

Rodenbiker adopts the term 'aesthetic state' to describe the intermingling of aesthetic preferences and power, arguing that 'the politics of visibility are paramount' in China (2022: 139). In Rodenbiker's view, 'Beautiful China' has become a keystone of Chinese authorities' ideology for governing, and this ideology has also promoted a trend of aestheticizing development: 'enhancing the beauty of the environment, society and everyday people' (ibid.: 140). The rural toilet is one object in this beautifying engineering.

We find three characteristics of this 'aesthetic governance' in RTR. First, the spectacular BV forms an aesthetic normativity and thus legitimizes governmental intervention. The successful Zhejiang model and the designs drawn up for BV provided an answer to villagers' aspiration for development. In this declining hollow village, the inhabitants desired a sense of the future, and the novel and bright Southern residential architecture style indeed delivered new possibilities. Even though the design plan was decided by authorities without villager input, villagers rarely denied the beauty of the aesthetic norm. Furthermore, this aesthetic was not limited to visual enjoyment, but also represented hopes for future development. While Elizabeth Perry (2011) found that village beautification in China's countryside construction campaign was at times implemented coercively, villagers in our case celebrated this beautification and expected to share the benefits from it. The Zhejiang model shaped one imagination of the village's future for local cadres and villagers: the village will be beautiful, tourism will flourish, and the economy will thrive. Therefore, once the beautifying project had commenced, every household wanted the painting work to come to them as soon as possible. Villagers whose houses had not yet been painted would praise houses that had been painted with a jealous, 'See! It looks like a new house!'. In fact, in the storm of demolishing dry latrines, some villagers who adopted 'buffering strategies' tore down their dry toilets by themselves when their houses were about to be painted. As one villager said, 'The painting work is coming, and my [dry] toilet here is buhaokan'.¹⁰

A common-sense understanding of BV between authorities and residents became the medium by which state development projects derived their legitimacy. With this consent on the part of the villagers, it was reasonable for the government to regulate the space in the context of agreement about the village's future, and this included reordering the spatial layout of toilets. Villagers resisted not because they disagreed with this regulation based on the principle of beautifying the environment, but because of the incomplete technical system needed for the beautification to be achieved. In this way, the development apparatus shifted the problem to the 'technical devices' — issues that can be solved sooner or later — while the development project remained intact and unchallenged. From our understanding of aesthetic

10. First author's fieldnotes, 22 June 2021.

governance, we would argue that the technical risks were hidden within this visual regimentation.

The second characteristic of aesthetic governance is the diminishing weight of scientific-technical modalities. As a physical space, the toilet consists of 'seen' above-ground facilities for storing waste, and 'unseen' subterranean systems for treating waste (Rogaski, 2004). The development of the sanitary toilet seeks to make visible facilities invisible, allowing people 'a physical distance from and ignorance of excreta and its management' (Morales, 2016: 66). Although the water-flush toilet offers a comprehensive solution for hygiene and sensory experience, and even renders the visible parts aesthetically pleasing (DiPiazza, 2015), it builds on a complex, high energy-consumption, underground system. If there is no water or sewerage system, the above-ground facility is just a void installation. In other words, the functioning, aesthetically pleasing visibility is dependent on the functioning invisibility. Thus, many scientists have suggested that the water-flush toilet is ill-suited for rural areas, as the underground system is hard to configure (Hu et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2019). The three-chamber water-flush toilets already offer a simplified system, but the sanitation function of the three-chamber toilet is only effective with a volume of around 7.3 m³ of water (Zhang et al., 2021). In S Village, chambers had a volume of just 1.5 m³ (the minimum requirement in the National Standard). This implies that these toilets had limited sanitary capacity. As a result, many villagers had to frequently clean the chambers with their own manpower, and because of the land conversion mentioned above, there was insufficient arable land to dump all the excreta. This had the effect of increasing the risk of disease transmission. In the process of the toilet revolution in S Village, these 'unseen' techno-scientific considerations were marginalized and ignored, while the spatial and visual function of the 'seen' toilet took centre stage.

Regardless of these unsatisfactory arrangements, villagers ultimately accepted water-flush toilets, because they could co-exist with dry latrines in the milieu of residents' everyday lives. Villagers could use them tactically according to need. However, the BV regime spurned this hybrid mode, driven by the third characteristic of aesthetic governance: eliminating unsightliness. Under the visual regimentation being applied, and notwithstanding that dry latrines could be sanitary and functional for villagers' lives, they had to be eliminated because their appearance and location were incongruent with the BV aesthetic. To deal with the contradiction, the government legitimated clearance by manipulating the relationship between legislation and visual order.

This firstly involved the land ownership of dry latrines in rural China. The ownership, management and use rights of household toilets (Németh and Schmidt, 2011) all belong to the household. However, dry latrines were often built outside of private houses, beyond the boundary of homestead land, which exposed private space to the public. According to Chinese law, rural lands are owned by their respective village collectives; the houses that

villagers build on the land belong to the households. Thus, the dry latrine was neither part of the house (although it belonged to the household), nor part of the public commons (although it was on collective land). The dry latrine was in a knotty situation. In the past, the construction of dry latrines was permitted in the blurred zone between public and private, and the legal issue was subordinated to the importance of the toilet's function. But now, it has been inadvertently defined as a public space in need of governance.

This meant that during the clearance campaign, as well as using persuasion based on the BV trend, local cadres also had a sharper tool to counter resistance: 'It belongs to collective land, it's not your own business; we have the right to deal with it in the name of illegal buildings'.¹¹ By employing this tool, local officials recalibrated dry toilets' blurred legality as mandatory legitimacy; the dry latrine that had persisted over many years in S Village became an 'illegal building'. This behaviour was identified by Ghertner as 'aesthetic criminalization' (2015: Ch. 4). Furthermore, through an unopposed environmental improvement project, the government had softly expropriated the façades of private houses. Although residents' houses were the private property of the household and were managed by family members, residents entrusted the decision rights regarding the appearance of house façades to the 'aesthetic state' for village development. Thus, how the façade should look became a public affair in need of governance. Eliminating any discordance became the task of the government; the hegemony of the aesthetic had been established.

ALIENATED SPACE AND SUSPENDED DEVELOPMENT

S Villagers often said that toileting mattered more than eating. In the toilet revolution, this intimate living space was violated as dry latrines were demolished and replaced by a malfunctional new facility, forcing villages to either bear the burden of dealing with waste or use temporarily rebuilt dry latrines. At the time of our fieldwork, many household toilets had been installed, the painting work associated with BV was well underway, and tourist infrastructure was being constructed in Forest Park, but there was no functioning sewerage system to which the household toilets could be connected. While they were experiencing a preparation process for tourism, villagers found themselves in a contradictory and surreal situation. On the one hand, their village environment had been visually improved and made more beautiful, with broadened roads and redecorated house façades, so that it looked like a new village. On the other hand, invisible daily practices such as toileting had become more problematic and troublesome, completely at odds with the visual aesthetic order.

11. Interview, S Village cadre, 4 July 2021.

The notion of place alienation is helpful to understand this situation. After Lefebvre expanded Marx's notion of alienation from the production of things to the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991; see also Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2021), studies in gentrification and touristification began to discuss the objective and subjective process of displacement and/or deprivation/separation from a place by those who have traditionally inhabited it (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2021; Silver, 2019). Based on a study of overtourism, Iban Diaz-Parra and Jaime Jover (2021: 159) claimed, 'Place alienation characterizes the feeling of displacement or inability to develop a sense of belonging towards one's current community'. This involves the disappearance of familiar spaces; the loss of decision-making power, belonging and ownership; the dominant norms, behaviours and values of new residents, alien to local culture; and the sense of loss of community (Diaz-Parra and Jover, 2021; Hyra, 2015; Tuttle, 2022). This implies alienation from one's own place in multiple ways. The inhabitants of S Village were alienated from something they owned. Place alienation here was not the result of dispossession of the space, or displacement of the local community. Rather, it was an alienation of physical lived practices, making them invisible in the aesthetic order for the sake of the development vision. In terms of ownership and user rights, the toilet belonged to the household. For the promise of a better future, villagers entrusted their house façades to public governance, but they did not expect that this aesthetic governance would result in their bodily life experiences being excluded and dismissed. The aesthetic regime was concerned only with the appearance of toilets and how this contributed to the overall aesthetic order; the actual toileting experience remained a 'zone of indifference' in this form of governance (Tsou, 1986). The appearance of the toilet was thus separated from local physical conditions and residents' bodily experiences. The toilet had become an abstraction. While the hygiene framework was at least concerned with the health of all, once the policy framework shifted to prioritize the environmental aesthetic, individuals' bodily experiences were eradicated from the aesthetic vision, and the 'human' was disregarded.¹²

We argue that this alienated space resulted from the aestheticization of daily life, which was driven by aestheticized rural development. As tourism was increasingly seen as a vital means of capital accumulation and rural revitalization in China, more and more villages were remade and recast as tourist commodities (Wilczak, 2017; Yang and Xu, 2022). Rural environmental beautification became an integral component of Chinese rural economic development. BV is a standardized product of this 'rural gaze' (Woods, 2011), whereby the government seeks to assimilate all village space into a homogenized idyllic rural imagery, transforming declining villages into consumer spaces and stimulating local economies. In this regard, the

12. We would like to thank Professor Yan Hairong for contributions to this argument.

rural space is only valued as a consumer space of the market economy. The model of Zhejiang demonstrated that the premise of a successful village commodification was a clean, orderly and outwardly attractive village space. In the case of S Village, while the BV and Forest Park projects were still under construction and not yet operationally marketized, consumption-oriented space production was already taking place in the village, making everything market-ready. In this spatial-social process of reordering, living spaces such as private houses and toilets were aesthetically governed.

This case shows that the RTR started from a will to improve but ended with suspended development. It failed to fix real problems in daily life, and also fell far short of achieving the prescribed development goals. At the end of our fieldwork, water-flush toilets were not functioning well, and dry latrines had not yet been fully eliminated. Villagers did not know when the next storm would come, and neither did officials. Both groups were managing an unfinished situation and awaiting an uncertain future. The dynamics and contestation within aesthetic politics hindered the realization of the development goal. Officials tended to deploy a belief of future to respond to negative consequences in development. Local cadres explained, 'We should think about problems from a view of development: sewers will be ready for every village in the future. We have to take a step ahead'.¹³ However, in the liminality between the future and the present, it was often those 'being developed' who bore the unintended consequences of in-betweenness. The life space of villagers had been reconfigured. Through the state-led toilet revolution and environment improvement programme, development projects stretched the state into the hidden corners of individuals' lives. James Scott describes the outcome of this kind of 'orderly development and social service' as follows: 'the dividend they paid was less an economic return than a dividend in expanding state spaces' (Scott, 1998: 295). In this way, in rural China, the toilet became a developmental space.

CONCLUSION

This study began with our confusion in the field: why were villagers' toilets, that were functioning well, being demolished? We investigated the decision-making process in the Chinese RTR and found that local officers seldom mentioned 'sanitation' or 'hygiene', but repeatedly used terms such as 'Beautiful Village', 'good-looking', and its opposite, 'buhaokan'. Grass-roots cadres who were responsible for the toilet revolution never interacted with hygiene departments, but they did work with rural development and construction departments. This anomaly drove us to explore the deep-seated mechanisms and logics relevant to these changes; we found that aesthetic

13. Interview, S Village cadre, 12 October 2021.

governance, and not conventional sanitation goals, had shaped the toilet revolution.

The status of Beautiful Village became both a blessing and a curse for S Village. The extent of reconfiguration under the BV regime far exceeded villagers' expectations for a better future. They never anticipated that constructing a visually pleasing image would demand such systematic rearrangement of physical space and adjustment of bodily experience. Before benefiting from it, they have suffered from it. When the toilet, a daily space inherently linked with bodily experience, was repurposed as integral to a visual village landscape serving visitors and tourists, a 'structural mismatch' (Lai, 2021: 87) was the inevitable result.

By examining this case, it is not our intention to comment on the inadequate policy implementation of the toilet revolution. Rather, we attempt through this case study to problematize 'the will to improve' (Li, 2007). Both BV and the installation of water-flush toilets are schemes aimed at improvement, but are they based on imagination or real needs? We also want to go beyond a simple narrative of top-down oppression by teasing out the subtle mechanisms of aesthetic governmentality in this environmental beautification process. It is neither a singular means of coercion nor one of citizen participation. Beautifying the village was a common objective shared by officials and villagers. It legitimized development projects and also offered an image of a brighter future for a declining village. However, in this aestheticizing development process, while the role of the spatial and visual order for a promising future was highlighted, the potential conflicts between aesthetics and daily life were downplayed and the human became invisible. This disregard for the realities of life tends to culminate in violence against humans in the end.

This article introduces a novel perspective for examining rural development by incorporating aesthetic politics. It nuances our understanding of China's current rural revitalization schemes and provides a modest contribution to research about how aesthetic governance helps the development apparatus become absorbed into and reconfigure rural areas.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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Photo S1: A 'Beautiful' Toilet