



The peanut field

By Robert Watt

RETURNING TO THE COUNTRY

During the May Day holiday, I accompanied a Chinese colleague back to his village in Shandong province. It lies between the city of Linyi and the yellow sea and is called Tong Jia Ling. It has around 270 people who, like my colleague, have the family name of Tong. We arrive late morning on a beautiful sunny day. His parents are out, but the house is unlocked. "We only close the door" he says, "to stop cats coming in."

A home in the country

The home comprises of single-story buildings arranged around a square courtyard. The construction is smart brick around the doors and windows with pale mud panels filling in between them. The walls are at least 40cm thick and I can imagine how well they'd insulate the inside from the extremes of the seasons. There is a main building and a row of bedrooms once used by my colleague and his siblings, now used for storage. Opposite is the kitchen and in between, an enclosure for hens and a short open ditch used as a toilet.

Inside, the main house is refreshingly cool. The mud walls are whitewashed and the floor laid in a grey brick herringbone pattern. The room is simply furnished and is largely unchanged since his father built it in the 1980s. The only new additions being a large flat screen TV, tall fridge freezer and a portrait of Xi Jinping. At one end there is a small metal stove used for heating in winter. Tong explains that on cold nights they would huddle around it, roasting food on the hot surface, his bed would also be moved inside and he would fall asleep to the sound of talking.

We have a short rest, drink locally grown

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Rizhao tea and eat strawberries from a neighbour's garden before going out to explore the village.

Village views

Their home opens onto a narrow alley just off a main street flanked by similar designed homes. Their pale-yellow walls, decorated in faded red or blue slogans, glow under the heat of the sun. Some homes I notice are securely locked and I look through a hole in a wall of one to see the courtyard overgrown with coarse shrubs and saplings; evidence the owners have left for the city. Occasionally there would be a newer building, noticeable by the increased use of brick, higher walls and grander doors. In other areas they are older, mostly empty and dry stone construction in poor repair. In some cases, they have fallen to rubble and trees grow thick in the courtyards and under the collapsed roofs like a civilization lost to the jungle.

It is very peaceful, just the birds, the intermittent bark of a dog or cluck of a chicken. Occasionally we meet other residents, older people introduced as aunts or

uncles, younger people as brothers or sisters, Tong's old primary school teacher. Tong knows everyone.

We visit his old school, a row of 4 rooms now converted into a local government office. Opposite is a small empty house that was once the teacher's home. Its garden is full of dry weeds and the remains of wooden desks. Now the village children travel on the backs of electric scooters to another school, bigger and with better facilities.

It doesn't take long to have wandered all the streets and narrow alleys of the village. Most routes end in fields or at a clump of fruit trees where Tong once scrunped apples, or a tree ringed pond where Tong learned to swim. Back then it didn't have the oily film on the surface, or the pockets of rubbish caught by the overhanging plants.

Tong shows me the house he has bought. It's more modern with an inside toilet and kitchen. He has bought it because it is impossible to get married without owning a house. He stays there on his rare visits to his family. Despite the more convenient design it lacks the charm and homeliness of his parent's home.

Working in the fields

In the afternoon we go to the fields. It's the planting time for peanuts, a popular crop in the regions dry and sandy soil. The rains had come early and most of the land had already been planted. Early shoots could be seen beneath the 12 rows of polythene that made up a family's allotment of land.

An uncle still had the planting to do and the man with the seed machine had not arrived, so we began the work by hand. Five of

us banking up the soft soil, making holes, putting in the seeds and covering them over. By the time the seed machinist arrived we had only planted half. We took a break, drank water as the sun dropped behind the village and wearily watched the final rows being planted, then the whole field watered and covered with the polythene sheets in less than 30 minutes.

Back home his mother was busy preparing dinner in the windowless kitchen. Fires had been lit in the brick ovens and a pair of large pans were steaming among a host of already prepared dishes. It seemed incredible that one person with two pans could prepare a feast for the hungry party. All the ingredients were freshly grown by the family or in the village, even the chicken had been dispatched by Tong's father earlier that morning.

A future in the village

Inside, we opened the beer and Baijrou. I asked what they would do now the planting had finished. They said those few rows can't provide an income and all the families had full time jobs in nearby businesses. I asked about those who had moved away, conscious that Tong, his two brothers and sister all lived outside the village. He said that while a lot of people had moved away, those who stayed rented the spare land to make larger fields. This provided more income and also brought efficiencies by allowing more use of machines. Tong's uncle had recently bought a tractor which was rented to several nearby villages. The village also boasted a small combine harvester for the expanding corn fields.

I asked Tong if he will return to the village and live in his house. He was non-committal.



Tong's fellow villagers

He has fond memories of his old life here. I feel the attractiveness of the simple peaceful life; the good air, the fresh food, being surrounded by friends and family but could he give up his city salary and lifestyle? I suspect his house would be a holiday home, a place to keep one foot in the past and imagine living here in future. I doubt he'll return to live.

回到农村老家

这个五一假期，我陪一位同事小全回他的山东老家走了一趟。这是一个名叫全家岭的村子，村里的 270 多个村民都姓全。

我同事的家是一个由几间平房组成的院子。除了一间正房，另外几间房曾经是全和他的兄弟姐妹们住的，现在被当作仓库之用。对面是厨房、一个鸡舍和一个露天茅厕。

进到正房，里面很凉爽，屋里陈设简单，白墙砖地，据说从他父亲上世纪八十年代盖了这栋房子，几乎没有改变，只是多了一些现代化的家电。冬天取暖还是依靠炉子。小全说，小时候一到冬天，全家人都要围着这个炉子睡觉，所以即便周围再嘈杂，他也能睡着。

小全带我在村子里走了一圈。家家户户的房子都差不多，浅黄色的外墙，上面还残留着一些褪了色的标语。有些房子大门紧锁，从墙上的洞望进去，里面已经杂草丛生了，显然主人进城打工了。偶尔有些新建的房子，院墙更高，大门也更气派。还有些房屋已经年久失修，空无一人了。

村子里很平静，只能听到鸟鸣，狗吠和叽叽喳喳的家禽。我们一路上碰到几个村民，小全都认识，他称呼他们为叔叔、阿姨、哥哥、姐姐。小全还带我参观了他的小学，现在已经改成村政府了。现在的孩子们都坐在家长的电动车后座上到更远的地方去上学，新学校面积更大，设施也好多了。

没用多久我们就把整个村子逛过来了。小全也在这里买了自己的房子，因为没有房子就不会有姑娘愿意嫁给他。

下午我们到地里去看了看，这会儿正是种花生的时节。播种的机器还没到，于是我们先动手干了起来。我们五个人一起翻土、挖洞、撒种子，然后再用土盖上。机器运来的时候，我们已经干了一半。我们到一旁喝水休息，看着机器在夕阳下把另一半活儿干完。回到家后，小全的妈妈已经准备好晚餐。

我们一边喝酒吃饭，一边聊天。他们说，仅靠地里的收成是不够的，几乎每个人都会在附近打工。我问小全以后是否会回到老家生活，他不置可否。虽然他怀念家乡的亲人和简单的生活，但他能放弃城市的收入和生活方式吗？也许老家是只有假期才会回去的地方吧。



The village houses