

SPOTLIGHT

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As the bus climbs Zhaitouling Mountain in Songyang county, East China's Zhejiang province, the vistas are punctuated with thick bamboo groves, lush green mountains and distant valleys. In short, the kind of scenic beauty with which much of the southwestern part of the province is graced.

Half an hour later the bus reaches the summit, and an ancient village looms. Houses built with earthy yellow soil, wooden boards, gray bricks and rocks sit high and low along the summit. From here, 850 meters above sea level, Chenjiapu village, 640 years old, extends 200 meters down.

More than 170 households are registered in Chenjiapu, for a total population of about 500, and the locals make their living mainly by growing tea, radishes and bamboo and producing dried bamboo shoots and dried sweet potato slices.

Now, as in many other ancient villages throughout China, urbanization and the promise of better incomes have prompted many villagers to go elsewhere to work or to study, and only about 100 people are left in Chenjiapu. Indeed, you get the feeling that the stalwarts left behind, mostly old farmers, are simply biding time as they wait for the death rites to be given to their village.

A study published last year by the China Academy of Social Sciences, *The China Rural Development Report*, said that every year the drift of people to cities leaves 594 million square meters of living space around the country unoccupied.

In the 1940s the Chinese anthropologist and sociologist Fei Hsiao-tung said in his seminal work *From the Soil - The Foundation of Chinese Society* that "Chinese society is fundamentally rural," having been an agricultural society for more than 2,000 years.

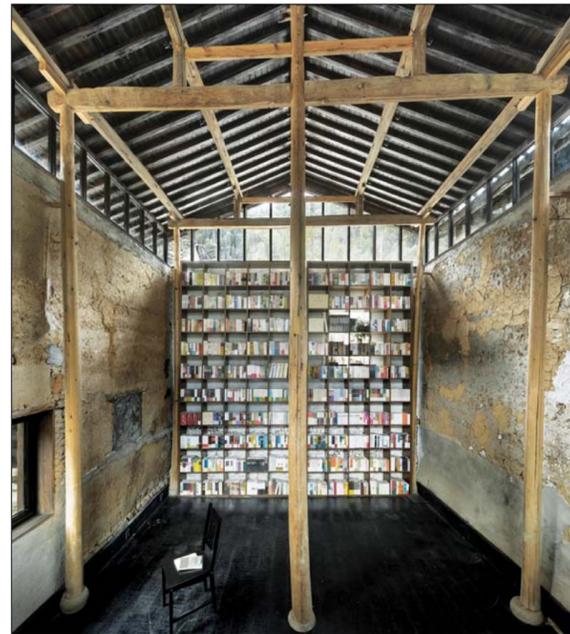
Yet despite the rapid urbanization of recent years, more than 40 percent of the country's nearly 1.4 billion people still live in the country, and for many city dwellers, pastoral living as depicted in ancient poems is regarded as idyllic.

On the outskirts of Chenjiapu is a car park, and the road that leads to the village becomes increasingly narrow before eventually reaching a cob-walled house that sits at the top of a cliff. This former abode has been thoroughly refurbished, and now Chenjiapu has its own modern bookshop.

The 350 sq m shop is modeled on an old auditorium, the aim being to retain the old wooden structure but give it a new burst of life, said the architect Zhang Lei, "not only to strengthen it but also make it cater to the taste of young people, especially those born after the 1990s".

Zhang and his team retained the basic size and wooden structure but divided the space into several sections for various uses.

On the ground floor visitors can



From top: Yunxi Library in Tonglu county, Zhejiang province, opened in 2015.

read, enjoy coffee and desserts and chat while lounging on couches, on the pads set on the big concrete steps, or in the half-open cafe curtained by hemp ropes, whose color "is similar to those cob walls in the ancient village", Zhang said.

The hemp rope curtain on the three sides allows cool wind in the mountains to run through, so that even in hot summer the cafe is a comfortable place to languish.

On the second floor is a small closed space that can be used to read or meditate, as the founder of the bookstore Qian Xiaohua wishes. Zhang built a window on the roof so that natural light can shine through, "a space of ritual", as he puts it.

Sitting in the open area on the second floor you can see the surrounding mountains, and such a natural setting is a fantastic place for anyone who wants to discover books or simply to read.

"One of our goals with the renovation was to change the relationship between humans, nature and architec-

ture, and the way people understand nature," Zhang said.

"We hoped that with this small project we could help give this ancient village new momentum to grow. We hope this will be a model for the preservation of other ancient villages."

Chenjiapu Bookstore is simply yet tastefully furnished, a clean, well-lit place that houses more than 20,000 books about literature, local history, soil and farming, among other things, and more than 1,000 cultural creative products such as postcards and notepaper themed on Songyang county.

Qian is best known for founding Librairie Avant-Garde in Nanjing, East China's Jiangsu province.

The full Chinese name of the bookstore incorporates the phrase *ping-min*, which literally means "common people", pointing to Qian's take on what avant-garde means.

"Real avant-garde is for common people, and the future of Librairie Avant-Garde bookstores is closely connected with the fate of China's soil and villages. When we open bookshops in



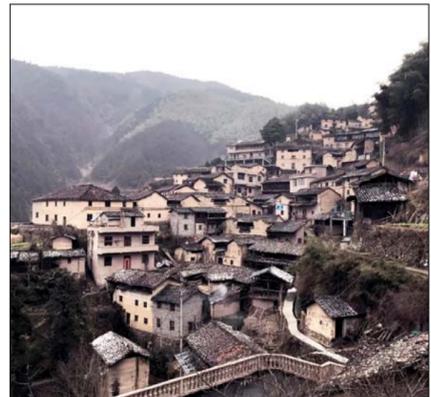
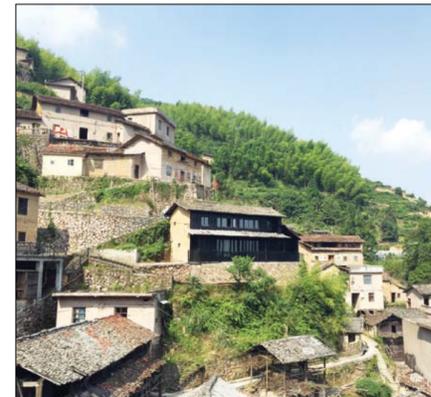
Bookshops bring burst of life

Their creative alliances with some of China's ancient villages are revitalizing the countryside



From top: Chenjiapu Bookstore is simply yet tastefully furnished, a clean, well-lit place that houses more than 20,000 books.

PHOTOS BY SU DIUDI, HOU BOWEN AND YAO LI / FOR CHINA DAILY



From left: The location and layout of Chenjiapu village in Zhejiang's Songyang county give it the appearance of a citadel.



Bishan Bookstore in East China's Anhui province was opened in 2014 by Qian Xiaohua, who is best known for founding Librairie Avant-Garde in Nanjing.

villages we are creatively putting our ideals into practice.

"If we want to revitalize ancient villages it is simply not enough just to protect and maintain them. They must be creatively transformed and new cultural values must be developed."

Chenjiapu Bookstore is the 14th bookshop Qian has opened, and the third he has opened in an ancient village, after Bishan Bookstore in East China's Anhui province, opened in 2014, and Yunxi Library in Tonglu county, Zhejiang province, which opened in 2015.

Bishan Bookstore is in a remote ancient village amid mountains that stretch for kilometers. Green fields, white walls and black-tiled roofs form the natural elements as though in an eye-catching pastoral painting.

In the village is a private park built during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), a private school founded in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), an ancient tower built in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and more than 100 well-preserved houses and ancestral halls of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The bookshop was built based on an ancient ancestral hall, Qitaitang. Qian also rebuilt the neighboring cattle shed, turning it into Niujian (cattle shed) Cafe, which has proved to be tremendously popular.

Besides literature and arts, Bishan

Bookstore provides books about rural areas in China, and old books about local culture, geography, history, customs and crafts.

An old woman surnamed Wang in Bishan village often goes to the bookshop to read. She once finished *Why Farmers Leave Soil* by Zhu Qizhen and Zhao Chenming in several days, and Qian said many villagers in Bishan have followed suit with that kind of reading practice and lifestyle.

Apart from books, it also offers a space for meetings, lectures, artistic exhibitions, folk music concerts and documentary screenings.

In four years, Bishan Bookstore has attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors to the village and the number of accommodation establishments has mushroomed, from two in 2014 to 33 now.

Yunxi Library in Daijia Mountain, Tonglu county, is a nonprofit program built in the community of the She ethnic group.

In May, when the Chinese writer A Yi went to Yunxi Library with Qian for an event related to his latest book, *Wake Me Up At 9 AM*, he was surprised to see lines of cars and buses stuck on the road leading to the library. Motorists and passengers had to go to the venue on foot, and after the event all the 24 hostels in the village were booked out.

Besides literature and arts, Bishan

All of this raises the question of whether villagers will find big influxes of outsiders to their villages disruptive and upsetting.

"On the contrary, when some villagers saw Qian arrive, they all came to talk to him," A Yi said. "Many old women sent him homemade food and specialties as if he were their son."

Across from the Chenjiapu bookshop is a second building that is part of the project, which was originally a residence. Under Qian's plan, writers, poets and artists go to live there, two people for one month at a time. One of the main aims is for them to get a taste of rural life and create works related to the place and their experience there.

Songyang was the hometown of the great Song Dynasty (960-1279) woman poet Zhang Yuniang, and it is on poetry that Qian wants to focus in Chenjiapu. He plans to eventually build a poetry museum and a poetry art museum. Members of the Summer Rain Poetry Society at Fudan University in Shanghai plan to find inspiration there, as do student writers from Nanjing University.

In 2008 when bookshops in China seemed to face a bleak future, Qian Xiaohua spent one month in Bishan village thinking about the future of Librairie Avant-Garde. It was in the countryside that he saw a promising future, he said. In April 2016 the Party secretary of Songyang county, Wang Jun, visited Bishan Bookstore and met Qian, asking him to build a bookshop in Songyang.

After Chenjiapu, two more Librairie Avant-Garde bookstores being built in rural areas will open this year, including one in Shaxi ancient town, Southwest China's Yunnan province, a community for the Bai ethnic group. Over the next five years, a total of 10 more such bookstore programs are planned for ethnic groups around China.

In a speech delivered at the Jiangsu Bookfair in July, Qian said: "As the setting for Librairie Avant-Garde bookstores I chose the countryside, which is where China's cultural roots lie. So if you want to revitalize Chinese culture, the first thing you need to do is revitalize the countryside."