The Chinese new middle class and their production of an 'authentic' rural landscape in China's gentrified villages

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ABSTRACT

Landscape change has long been a key characteristic of gentrification research. While much of this research has examined the intention of the middle class to consume authenticity and the consequent landscape changes in gentrified neighborhoods in the Global North, much less attention has been given to contexts in the developing world. This paper addresses this gap by discussing an empirical case of the rural landscape produced by Rural Tourism Makers (RTMs) – a group of new middle class– in China. This research is based on participant observation and twenty-three interviews with RTMs running *Minsu* guesthouses, a type of tourist accommodation involving the skilled renovation of existing village buildings. To illustrate the empirical nuances, the research draws insights from two perspectives on landscape, namely the symbolic landscape and the lived landscape, to show how RTMs have produced a new rural landscape of local and global characteristics and to examine the authenticity of these landscapes. In so doing, the research enriches our knowledge of gentrification in a non-Western context by analyzing a gentrified rural landscape in the Chinese context, produced by the emerging Chinese new middle class and their westernized consumption preferences. Meanwhile, the authenticity of this new rural landscape, which is based on RTMs' expectations and imagination, strengthens the constructionist view of authenticity in gentrification studies.

1. Introduction

Despite the diverse definitions of gentrification, scholars agree that landscape change is one of its key characteristics (Phillips, 2018). Studies on gentrification in the Global North have addressed some important ways through which middle-class gentrifiers' intentions to consume authenticity have contributed to landscape change in gentrified neighborhoods – such as the younger generation's enthusiasm for consuming authenticity in immigrant enclaves and white gentrifiers' eagerness to consume exotic authentic food and lifestyle in ethnic neighborhoods (Davidson, 2007; Hubbard, 2016). However, this idea of authenticity and gentrified landscapes makes little sense in the Global South, where the emerging new middle class act as gentrifiers and the characteristics of their consumption preferences differ markedly from their counterparts in the Global North (Cao, 2023; Elfick, 2011; Ning & Chang, 2022). Gentrification scholars from outside the Global North point out that the understanding of gentrification should not be seen as a

simple expansion to various contexts through one-way direct transfer. Instead, they call for researchers to understand how gentrification interacts with other complex urban and rural processes in specific contexts (Ley & Teo, 2014; Shin et al., 2016; Waley, 2016).

Following Hines (2010), this study focuses on landscape changes to understand the identities and consumption preferences of Chinese gentrifiers in order to understand how gentrified new rural landscapes are produced in China and how these landscapes differ from that in the Global North contexts (Ghose, 2004; Phillips & Smith, 2021). As such, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of landscape change in rural China due to gentrification to further destabilize the dominant role of Western consumption styles and theories in gentrification studies. This is of great importance because China's political system and development history remains significantly different from capitalist countries in the Global North in giving birth to the Chinese new middle class (Tsang, 2014). If gentrification is a concept that is closely related to social class, it is necessary to have a more nuanced understanding of

gentrification in China, given its unique social, cultural, and political background.

For this reason, this research uses an empirical study of the new rural landscape produced by rural tourism makers (RTMs) in China. RTMs (*xiangcun lvyou chuangke*) is a phrase that was first used in a policy initiative launched by the National Tourism Administration in China in 2015 called *A Hundred Villages and Ten Thousand Rural Tourism Makers*. The target of the initiative was to create 100 RTM Model Bases within a three-year period from 2015 to 2017 by engaging 10,000 RTMs in the rural tourism industry, including graduates, urban–rural return migrants, art professionals, and teams of young entrepreneurs. The aim was to transform and upgrade rural tourism development and to encourage an innovative rural tourism development model (General Office of National Tourism Administration in China, 2015).

The policy document gave no clear definition of RTMs. Instead, it listed a few examples of the sort of people who have the potential to be RTMs, including the graduates, urban–rural return migrants, art professionals, and teams of young entrepreneurs identified above. These are described as people 'who have a stronger sense of entrepreneurship and who are superior' (General Office of National Tourism Administration in China, 2015). Compared to local residents, RTMs have higher cultural capital, they are economically better off, and they come from outside the villages where RTMs' Model Bases are – mostly from cities, where they have urban living experiences (Chen et al., 2022a). This group forms part of the new middle class in China who have a strong interest in consumerism and who try to distinguish themselves from others by consuming products with individualized design characteristics. More importantly, instead of being mere consumers, RTMs are proactively engaged in the design and production of individualized products that they, and people like them, would like to consume.

Following the launch of this policy, local governments across China-working in partnership with the National Tourism Administration-created 'RTM Model Bases' to attract RTMs. In practice, this meant identifying specific villages or rural areas as Model Bases due to their rich rural tourism resources and potential for rural tourism development. It also meant investing in infrastructures and property when marketing the village or rural area to potential RTMs. The policy defines Model Bases as incubators for rural tourism innovation and entrepreneurship, places where new forms of rural tourism development would initially take place, and become demonstration zones for the transformation and upgrading of rural tourism. One hundred 'National RTM Model Bases' were identified and listed by the National Tourism Administration between 2015 and 2017. In the tradition of China's 'exemplary society', where policy learning has often been encouraged through models (Oakes, 2013), the RTM model bases were designed as examples to guide the transformation and upgrading of rural tourism and to encourage new and innovative development initiatives in rural areas beyond these listed areas.

The production of the new rural landscape by RTMs can be seen as an extension of artist-led rural regeneration, an alternative to state-led rural regeneration that has been widely applied in China. It is considered that China's state-led rural regeneration, which has been strongly affected by official discourses of modernization, has greatly improved the physical landscape of many semi-abandoned, "hollowed-out" villages resulting from the out-migration of a large proportion of rural residents and a consequent natural decline in the rural landscape (Long et al., 2012). The Beautiful Village Campaign, for example, is a national campaign that started in the early 2000s in China to promote the image of many villages to attract urban residents as tourists (Chen et al., 2022b). However, Beautiful Village Campaign, which has significantly changed the superficial appearance of houses in the villages through the renovation of façades, ignited a national debate about what real rural beauty is, and what rural China should look like. To create their imagined ideal rural idyll, pioneer architects and artists in China have started to produce new rural landscapes over the last decade, based on their aesthetic dispositions and understandings of rural beauty (Deng et al.,

2016; Qian, 2017; Qu, 2020; Yang & Xu, 2022; Ye et al., 2015). The aim was to create an alternative rural landscape to that in the villages which had previously undergone state-led rural regeneration projects across China.

It was in this context that RTMs started their practices in rural areas. By selecting specific villages, renting houses from local residents, renovating buildings, and organizing cultural activities, RTMs are working to produce a new rural landscape. One of the most popular projects among RTMs is *Minsu* guesthouses, a small type of tourist accommodation involving the skilled renovation of existing village buildings by RTMs. RTMs rent houses from local residents on ten-year or longer contracts, for which they normally sign an agreement that deals with the extent to which the houses can be renovated or rebuilt. As most houses rented to RTMs have been idle for years or even fallen into disrepair, local residents were happy for them to be renovated for the running of guesthouses.

Drawing on twenty-three interviews with RTMs who built *Minsu* guesthouses and participant observation of two RTM Model Bases, this research aims to explore how RTMs representing the new middle class in China produce new rural landscapes, and the extent to which such landscapes are authentic. In so doing, the research offers two contributions. First, it reports on the emerging rural landscapes produced by the new middle class in China, which is interesting because existing studies have widely explored the landscape change in gentrified neighborhoods in Western contexts. However, the landscape change in gentrified neighborhoods in China, produced by the new middle class emerging in a different socioeconomic context, makes the Chinese context worth exploring. The paper also reports on the new 'authentic' rural landscape produced and consumed by RTMs, which combines local and global landscape characteristics. This offers a good opportunity to reflect on the meaning of authenticity and the social construction of authenticity in gentrification studies.

In the following sections, we start by reviewing existing literature on gentrification, landscape change, and authenticity. We then contextualize gentrification and the new middle class in China. Both sets of literature act as inspiration for this research. The study then elaborates on the methods used before summarizing the research findings and discussing their contributions and implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Gentrification, landscape change, and authenticity

The term 'gentrification' was originally coined by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964. The classic form of gentrification in Glass's definition describes the refurbishment of residential properties by middle-class gentrifiers and the displacement of working-class residents in London (Glass 1964). Since its coinage, the phenomenon has expanded from the transformation of residential property to include developments in recreation, consumption, and production (Smith, 2002). Besides, the concept of displacement, which has arguably been seen as definitive constituent of gentrification, has been broadened from direct last-resident displacement to include more indirect forms, such as displacement pressure or exclusionary displacement (Marcuse, 1985). While the former highlights how changing characteristics of a place make it less livable for long-term residents, the latter happens when certain households are prevented from moving in gentrified neighborhoods (Marcuse, 1985). Consequently, the classic definition of gentrification was contested, and more embracing definitions have been put forward. For example, Clark (2005, p. 263) refers to gentrification as 'a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital'. Rather than restricting gentrification to residential buildings, Clarke expands this concept to include changes in other types of land uses and landscapes. Meanwhile, Shin et al. (2016, p. 456) define

gentrification as 'the commodification of space accompanying land use changes in such a way that it produces indirect/direct/physical/symbolic displacement of existing users and owners by more affluent groups'. Despite variations in definition, three main characteristics of gentrification remain, namely the investment of capital, the socioeconomic alteration of gentrified neighborhoods, and the change of land uses or landscapes (Lees et al., 2008).

The phenomenon of gentrification has also expanded from urban centers to rural locations, resulting in rural gentrification (Hines, 2010; Phillips, 1993; Qian et al., 2013; Stockdale, 2010). Researchers highlight the devalorisation of agricultural or non-agricultural properties and their revalorisation as residential properties for the incoming middle class (Phillips, 2004).The concept of displacement has been less discussed in studies of rural gentrification, which differs from gentrification research in urban contexts. The reason is that the remaining of many long-term residents in the gentrified rural communities means that rural gentrification does not necessarily involve the displacement of people (Guimond & Simard, 2010). Besides, in rural communities, depopulation may happen before the arrival of the middle class, which, according to Halfacree, (2018, p. 28), can 'be seen as repopulation of an already depopulated and still depopulating countryside'. Despite this, researchers have recognized indirect forms of displacement in gentrified rural communities, especially in the form of socio-cultural displacement (Hines, 2010; Zhao, 2019). For example, Grabbatin et al's (2011) research highlights how land-use changes in the process of rural gentrification in the USA results in the displacement of culturally significant practices, which brings 'cultural displacement'. Similarly, Zhao's (2019) research on rural gentrification in China, demonstrates changes in the visual appearance of local architectures and related living practices, which were claimed to be seen as socio-cultural displacement.

While recognizing the importance of socio-cultural displacement, the focus of this research will be given to landscape change, echoing Phillips's (2018) call for a more substantial discussion on the concept of landscape in gentrification studies. He summarizes four ways through which gentrification studies conceptualize landscapes, defining them under the categories of material landscape, social landscape, symbolic landscape, and living landscape. While recognizing these concepts of landscape in gentrification studies, the current study is concerned more with the perspectives of symbolic and lived landscapes, and for this reason the major source of inspiration for this study is twofold. From the symbolic perspective, the landscape is not something we see; it is more a way of seeing things from different cultural perspectives (Cosgrove, 1989). In this sense, the landscape represents different cultural meanings that connect directly to people's social identities (Duncan & Duncan, 2001). Despite its advantage in explaining the representational meanings of the landscape and its embedded power relations, the symbolic perspective of landscape has been criticized as separating disembodied cultural meanings from the physical landscape onto which cultural meanings have been projected (Wylie, 2007). As a result, a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the symbolic perspective of landscape has culminated in a shift toward the study of lived landscape, the focus of which is not on 'images of landscape' but on 'landscaping' as a process that highlights the ongoing shaping of the landscape, the self, and the physical body through practice and performance (Wylie, 2007). The lived landscape perspective also tends to see the landscape as 'affectual' as it impacts people in multiple ways beyond the cognitive and visual (Phillips, 2014). Instead of seeing the symbolic and lived landscapes as contradictory, these two perspectives are combined in this research, which not only allows the researcher to explore the cultural meanings of the landscape, but also the material world to which they are now becoming attached.

The gentrified landscape has certain characteristics, and these have been documented as a result of the gentrifiers' intention to consume authenticity. Lees et al. (2008, p,113) point out that 'a gentrifying or gentrified neighborhood has a certain "feel" to it, a certain look, a landscape of conspicuous consumption that makes the process and the

effect readily identifiable'. Gentrifiers seem to be interested in displaying their distinctive tastes and values through consuming authenticity in gentrified neighborhoods, where they seek authentic food, lifestyles, and locations (Zukin, 2009). As an example, Zukin (2008) demonstrates how an 'aura of authenticity' was created in the previously working-class neighborhood around the Union Square Park area in downtown Manhattan by entrepreneurs to attract middle-class gentrifiers. It is worth noting that gentrifiers not only look to consume authentic local cultures but are also eager to consume authentic exotic food and lifestyles, which has become an important approach by which they blend themselves into narratives of urban cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism (Bridge, 2007; Cao, 2023).

The definition of authenticity has attracted wide academic discussion, although no real agreement has been reached among researchers. While some researchers assume objective authenticity, others highlight the social construction in defining the characteristics of authenticity. In tourism studies, Maccannell (1973) coined the term 'staged authenticity' based on the division between front regions and back regions in tourism. According to Maccannell (1973), the front regions and facades of tourist areas are always decorated with reminders of back region activities so that they can attract tourists who want to experience an authentic back region. This assumed objective authenticity of the back region has been challenged by Cohen (1988), who came up with the concept of emergent authenticity to highlight the idea that the connotation of authenticity is not given and is instead socially constructed. Under the concept of emergent authenticity, 'patently inauthentic objects and performances can nonetheless become symbolically authentic once they are widely recognized and appreciated as vital components of local culture' (Ji, 2021, p. 3).

From a constructivist perspective, therefore, authenticity is neither a singular nor a static quality. Instead, plural authenticities are socially constructed and politically contested by multiple stakeholders through ongoing authentication processes that decide what is authentic and what is not. In gentrification studies, authentication should be considered and analyzed as open-ended processes through which heterogeneous relations and interests are constantly reworked. Although most gentrification studies agree with the social construction of authenticity, they pay scant attention to the actual process of authentication (Ji, 2021).

2.2. Contextualizing gentrification and the new middle class in China

Despite the wide discussion of the consumption of authenticity in gentrification studies in the Western context, Cao (2023) points out that the ethnicized neighborhoods and immigrant enclaves that dominate gentrification studies in such contexts differ considerably from their counterparts in the Global South. She reminds researchers of the questionable applicability of Western-developed authentic consumption practices in the context of the Global South. Cao's (2023) argument fits into the broader claims by gentrification researchers outside the Global North, who argue against the understanding of gentrification as a simple expansion to other contexts through one-way direct transfer, calling instead for researchers to understand how gentrification interacts with other complex urban or rural processes in specific contexts (Ley & Teo, 2014; López-Morales, 2018; Shin et al., 2016; Waley, 2016).

In China, gentrification research has always been connected with housing markets, and the role of the government is heavily emphasized, which adds significant narratives and unique Chinese characteristics to academic discussions and debates on gentrification (He, 2010, 2019; Wu, 2016). However, from the consumption side, the role of the new middle class as gentrifiers (Pow, 2009; Wang & Lau, 2009) and other social and cultural processes leading to gentrification in the Chinese context (Arkaraprasertkul, 2018; Cao, 2023; Ning & Chang, 2022) is yet to be fully understood and remains under-researched – although there are a few exceptions. In their study of the retail gentrification of 50 Moganshan Road, a former industrial zone and artists' colony in Shanghai, (Ning & Chang, 2022) demonstrate how artistic production

and aesthetic consumption work together to contribute to the transformation of artist communities into cultural consumption sites. In the rural context, Qian et al., (2013) demonstrate how grassroots artists' aestheticization contributed to the emergence of gentrification in Xiaozhou village in Guangzhou. Drawing on the study of *Minsu* guesthouse in Dali, Zhao (2019) illustrates how the changes made to Bai architecture by newcomers can be seen as socio-cultural displacement, which account for a broadened definition of displacement in gentrification studies. More recently, Yang & Xu's (2022) research shows how gentrifiers' relocation and the investments they make to materialize and commodify their imagined rurality have promoted the development of tourism and gentrification in rural China.

Art producers and rural tourism gentrifiers form part of the growing new middle class that has emerged over the past few several decades in China (Lees et al., 2016). These citizens differ from the traditional middle class in both the Western and the Chinese contexts. While the traditional Western middle classes rank between the upper class and the working class, representing people who occupy the central part of a social hierarchy, the middle class in China (中国中产阶层,*zhongguo zhongchan jieceng*, literally the middle-income stratum) is linked more to economic status than to class (Goodman and Zang, 2008). Compared to the traditional Chinese middle class, 'the Chinese new middle class is distinguished more by sociocultural than by economic factors' (Tsang, 2014, p. 181). Growing up under the influence of economic reform and marketization in China as well as globalization, they represent the newly emerging group with higher spending power and strong interests in consumerism (Lees et al., 2016).

Research into the Chinese new middle class shows that they display great interest in pursuing urban lifestyles in gentrified neighborhoods with distinctive tastes (Wang & Lau, 2009). Recent studies on gentrification in China also show that the Chinese new middle class seeks to acquire an aura of aesthetics and art to distinguish themselves from others and to show their distinctive and unique tastes (Cao, 2023; Ning & Chang, 2022; Pow, 2009). Consumption sites that are endowed with rich cultural capital have attracted the attention of the Chinese new middle class. While research into the Chinese new middle class has documented the way they 'consume authenticity' in the Chinese context (Cao, 2023), much less attention has been given to the way they fabricate that aura of authenticity.

Building on these discussions, this paper seeks to explore how Chinese new middle-class RTMs produce new rural landscapes in China and the extent to which such landscapes are authentic. In so doing, it aims to extend the discussion of the middle-class character of the gentrified landscape beyond the Western context and to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of authenticity in gentrification studies.

3. Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was carried out in two RTM model bases: Moganshan International Rural Tourism (*Yangjiale*) Cluster in Zhejiang province and *Mingyue* Village International Pottery Art RTM based in Sichuan Province (Fig. 1). Both provinces have played leading roles in rural regeneration and rural tourism development in China (Luo et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2016). The two RTM model bases were selected because of the gentrification process that they were undergoing (See (Chen et al., 2022b) for more details). Both cases underwent depopulation of local residents and disinvestment of agriculture before the incoming of RTMs. However, the arrival of RTMs and their investment in *Minsu* guesthouses, have brought significant demographic changes, turning the villages which used to be hollowed-out villages with limited number of the old, the women, and the children, to mixed gentrified communities with middle-class RTMs, low-income residents, and variegated tourists from all over the world. Besides, local physical infrastructure and landscape have seen great changes, from the existence of large numbers of uninhabited houses and limited living facilities to the emergence of well-designed *Minsu* guesthouses, with improved infrastructure like roads and public toilets in the villages. The case villages transformed from ordinary villages to mature tourism-gentrified communities. In Brenner's (2003) terms, the two sites represent atypical cases in terms of RTM model bases, although both are prototypical or archetypal cases (first or extreme cases, the characteristics of which may have become generalized over time). One of the authors carried out four months' worth of fieldwork from November 2017, and from October 2018 to April 2019.

Interviews with twenty-three RTMs engaged in building and running the *Minsu* guesthouses provided the main source of data for this paper (Fig. 2 and Table 1). To recruit RTMs, we used a combination of gatekeeper and snowball sampling. Gatekeepers have been widely used in qualitative research because of their familiarity with the participants, which is helpful to build trust between the researchers and the participants (Campbell et al., 2006). In this research, people in charge of the recruitment and/or management of RTMs in the RTM model bases became gatekeepers for us. Besides, we used a snowball sampling approach to recruit RTMs. Snowball sampling was advantageous for approaching RTMs who were often absent from the villages as we could make appointments with them and invite them to come back to the villages for interviews. We stopped sampling RTMs when no more new themes could be generated from their stories and when we reached descriptive saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Overall, the interviews concentrated on four main aspects. Firstly, the RTMs' reasons for choosing the villages and the specific houses in the villages. Secondly,
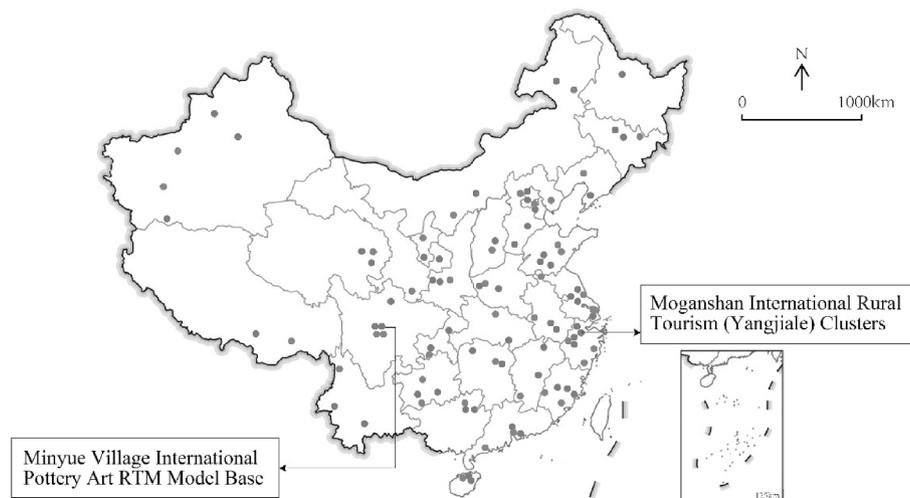

Fig. 1. National RTMs' Model Bases and the two field sites for this research.
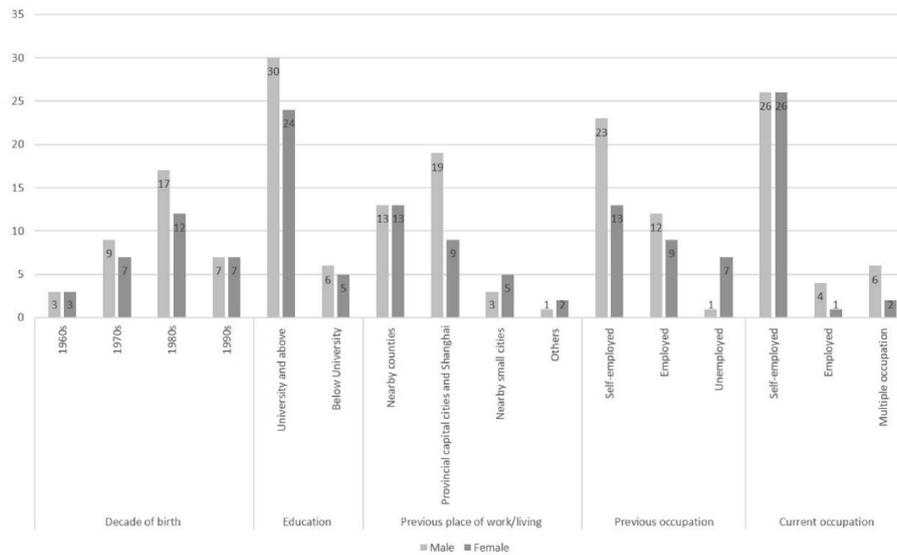
Fig. 2. Summary characteristics of RTMs interviewed.

Table 1
Some basic information of the RTMs interviewed.

Number	Gender	Age	Current Base	Previous place of living/working	Current work	Previous work
1R1	Male	50 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Artist
1R2	Female	50 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Handicraftwoman
1R4	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Designer
1R7	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Shanghai	Owner of guesthouse	Artist
1R9	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Shanghai	Owner of guesthouse	Sports worker
1R11	Female	40 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Staff in a bank
1R12	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Suzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Staff in a tourism real estate company
1R13	Female	30 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Manager in a company
1R14	Male	40 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Manager in a company
1R15	Male	50 s	Moganshan	Hangzhou	Owner of guesthouse	Manager in a company
1R16	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Shanghai	Owner of guesthouse	Manager in a company
1R17	Male	30 s	Moganshan	Shanghai	Owner of guesthouse	Designer
1R18	Female	40 s	Moganshan	Deqing	Owner of guesthouse	Civil servant
2R1	Female	30 s	Mingyue Village	Shenzhen	Owner of guesthouse	Staff in a tourism company
2R2	Male	30 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Staff in a tourism company
2R6	Male	30 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Freelancer
2R7	Female	40 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Freelancer
2R9	Female	50 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Freelancer
2R10	Male	40 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Manager in a company
2R11	Female	30 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Freelancer
2R12	Female	40 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Staff
2R13	Female	30 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Staff
2R15	Female	30 s	Mingyue Village	Chengdu	Owner of guesthouse	Artist

their experiences of living in the villages. Thirdly, their experiences of working in the villages, such as renovating the old houses and running rural tourism businesses. Fourthly, their experiences of arranging aspects of tourism in the villages, such as organizing various kinds of activities for tourists and taking the role as the exemplary tourists.

To guard against over-reliance on self-reporting (Silverman, 2014), interview responses were validated and supplemented using data from participant observation, completed by a team member who lived and worked alongside the RTMs for approximately two months at each field site. Working with gatekeepers offered us the chance to participate in and observe what was going on in the case villages. In most cases, interviews with RTMs started or finished with a tour of their guesthouses, which allowed us to observe the *Minsu* guesthouse landscape directly. During the interviews, we also took photos of subjects or aspects of tourism that either we as researchers or the informants felt were important. We also undertook interviews with people not engaged in running *Minsu* guesthouses, such as local residents and local government officials, who provided useful information for triangulation. All data

were analyzed with NVIVO 12, using a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Staying local: producing an 'authentic' rural landscape

The first and most important consideration for RTMs when they decided to build *Minsu* guesthouses in the rural areas was to find an 'authentic' house in a village that had fallen into disuse or disrepair. They often visited many places before finally choosing an ideal village. Two RTMs described how they found the villages or houses that they wanted:

'We visited almost all the villages in Moganshan County. The village that we finally chose was at the end of a road … It looked like a village that had been separated from the outside world. There were 42 households, each of which was separate from the next as some houses are on a higher level and some other houses are on a lower level … It was the layout of houses like this that attracted us.' (Interview 1R16, male, 1980s)

'I was walking along the road. Can you imagine the massive bamboo forest which is jade green and old mud houses just hiding in the bamboo forest? The moment I saw them, I knew they were what I wanted.' (Interview 1R1, male, 1960s)

Both respondents appreciated the authentic status of the houses and their harmonious relationships with the surrounding environments, such as the aesthetically disordered houses based on the terrain of the village, or the mud houses in the bamboo forest. Authenticity is of great importance for RTMs as they want to produce an alternative landscape to the ones that were mass-produced under state-led rural regeneration projects. The authenticity here is socially constructed, which is only possible through comparison with what is seen as inauthentic by RTMs. RTMs' appreciation for authentic houses in ordinary villages was expressed through their anti-urbanizing and anti-modernizing attitudes towards beautiful villages that had undergone state-led rural regeneration. Here are two illustrations:

'Zhejiang province has promoted the Beautiful Villages project for many years… However, the emphasis of the government project is on superficial appearances instead of a really beautiful village.' (Interview 1R1, male, 1960s)

'I grew up with my grandpa and grandma in a village near Chongqing, to which I had a strong attachment. I thought of it when I first had the idea of going back to a village. But I gave it up because a highway from Shanghai to Chengdu went right through that village. The environment of the village had changed so much. The highway is very close to the back of my grandparents' house. All the houses in the village were required by the local government to be fixed with tiles. I just could not understand why. The original mud houses were very beautiful, with mud walls and roof tiles. Now, all the households were told to use white tiles on their surfaces. I felt as if I had lost my hometown [*guxiang*], which now only exists in my memory.' (Interview 2R15, male, 1980s)

Both interviewees criticized the state-led rural reconstruction projects in China as paying too much attention to superficial appearance – or what was called *chuanyi daimao* (literally 'to get dressed and put on a hat') (Chio, 2017) or *tuzhi mofen* ('paint some rouge and put on some powder') (Zhang et al., 2014). While rural gentrifiers in Western countries express their social distinction by rejecting mass-produced suburban housing, RTMs in China express their aesthetic preferences by rejecting the heavily urbanized and modernized villages, and appreciating the mundane and more authentic villages, with naturally dilapidated buildings.

After choosing an 'authentic' village and renting ideal houses from local residents, RTMs renovated or rebuilt the houses into *Minsu* guesthouses based on an agreement with the landlords. To maintain the aura of authenticity that they wanted to follow, they designed and built *Minsu* guesthouses on an individual basis, taking local architectural character into consideration. Unlike the mass production of modern houses in the state-led rural regeneration projects in China, RTMs made use of traditional dwelling architecture styles (*chuantong minju*), which represents a form of rural beauty in China that harmonized with the natural environment and humanized the scenes of life (Li, 2015; Mei, 2017). Among the twenty-three *Minsu* guesthouses in this research, twelve were based on abandoned residential houses and were renovated into traditional dwelling house styles. An ambiance of symbolic authenticity was created in three ways. Firstly, RTMs tended to renovate or rebuild the old houses on their original sites and use their original architectural styles. Secondly, the small scale of the building and its relationship with the surrounding natural environment was maintained to connect to the history of the building and to reveal the individuality of the houses. Thirdly, to fit with traditional dwelling house styles, the interior designs of the *Minsu* guesthouses used Chinese design styles, local materials and artwork of a traditional character (Fig. 3).

From the perspective of a lived landscape, the 'authentic' rural

Fig. 3. The interior of a *Minsu* guesthouse in Mingyue village. Source: photos by the author.

landscape described above engaged RTMs' practices not only in the making of the landscape but also in the mundane rural life that they experienced afterwards. RTMs we spoke to in this research emphasized the time they spent in the villages and their participation in a variety of activities, from building houses to setting up gardens or yards, from planting trees to harvesting fruit, and from picking fresh vegetables to cooking homemade food. The degree of engagement in the process of producing this new rural landscape was seen by RTMs as an important way of accentuating their identity and distinguishing themselves from tourists. Here are two examples:

'I remember the time when we built the houses. I worked with the construction workers. I remember working hard under the sun with long boots and shorts, sometimes even with no shirt on. I enjoyed that time. That also made a strong bond between me and the houses … This is the thing that you cannot experience when you are a tourist and only stay in a village for a couple of days.' (Interview 1R1, male, 1960s)

'When I decided to build this *Minsu* guesthouse, I quit my job and moved to this village. I got up at six every day and I worked with other construction workers the whole day. I did not feel tired. It was like waiting for my first baby to come and I was so excited … As tourists, people enjoy the result of beautiful rural settings. But I enjoy the process of producing this beauty.' (Interview 1R4, male, 1980s)

In both cases, respondents spoke of their own experiences of engaging in the building of houses in the villages, through which they distinguished themselves from tourists. While tourists normally only stay in a village for a couple of days to look at the rural landscape from a distance, RTMs were actively engaged in making and remaking that rural landscape through house-building practices.

Reflecting the prevailing gender norms in this research, men engaged more with the construction process (as is demonstrated in the two cases above) while women seemed to be more interested in domestic pursuits such as arranging the garden or the yard. For example, a female RTM had a chicken pen, a fishpond, and a small vegetable garden in her yard, where she planted various kinds of flowers, vegetables and fruit, and raised chickens and fish. Through engaging in seasonal activities like picking tea leaves, harvesting bamboo shoots and lemons, and making new dishes with the newly harvested vegetables from her yard, she was attempting to live her imagined rural life, mimicking the traditional rural lifestyle in China. This reflected the division of labor in traditional rural families in China, where men took charge of things like building the houses and earning money for their families (*nan zhu wai*), and women were supposed to manage the domestic activities (*nv zhu nei*) (Chen, 2004).

Another woman who ran a *Minsu* guesthouse in Moganshan town expressed how pleasant she found it to have her own house with a yard

(*yuanzi*), and how she enjoyed cleaning the yard in the morning. She said:

> 'When I was working in Hangzhou, I always drove through a place where I saw people cleaning their houses every day. I thought that was something nice and I wanted to have my own house one day … Now I have a house. I enjoy waking up in the morning and cleaning my yard. I even wrote a poem about cleaning the yard because I thought it represented a kind of lifestyle that is down-to-earth and happy … I like breathing the fresh air in the morning, I like picking up the yellow leaves on the ground in autumn, I am glad to see the snails in the morning after a night of rain.' (Interview 1R13, female, 1980s)

From a lived landscape perspective, both cases emphasize the importance of landscape practices (Wylie, 2007) that involve simple everyday practices such as planting and harvesting vegetables and cleaning yards. Being able to live in rural areas and enjoy a down-to-earth rural lifestyle was seen by many RTMs as a middle-class privilege in an era of rapid urbanization.

5. Going global: Westernizing the landscape

Beyond the local level, the rural landscape has also been globalized. Not all the *Minsu* guesthouses employed traditional dwelling architecture styles. Instead, various architectural styles have been adopted to form a globalized landscape in the case villages. There is the *béton brut* style characterized by the strong raw concrete impression of the building (Fig. 4), an American country style expressed through vintage interior decorations and big gardens with rocking chairs, wildflowers, and picnic blankets (Fig. 5), a French style expressed through French-style furniture like sofas, tables, beds, and windows, as well as a mix-and-match of all of these different architectural styles.

This globalized landscape is also revealed through interior design that reflects Western characteristics. For example, the Nordic style, characterized as minimalist, was widely adopted by RTMs who ran *Minsu* guesthouses. Meanwhile, some typically Western spaces with Western characters, such as fireplaces, bars, and coffee shops were built into *Minsu* guesthouses, which were not characteristic of traditional rural houses in China. Artworks expressing global culture were also used by RTMs as decorations in the guesthouses. For example, Fig. 6 shows the reception and lobby of a *Minsu* guesthouse in Moganshan. Although it employs a traditional dwelling building style as its exterior, the interior design has a strongly globalized character, with vintage pictures of celebrities from around the world. Photos of international visitors to this

Fig. 5. (Right) The exterior of a *Minsu* guesthouse in American country style in Moganshan town. Source: photos by the author.

Fig. 6. The reception and lobby of a *Minsu* guesthouse in Moganshan. Source: photos by the author.

Minsu guesthouse were also used to decorate the walls. The owner of this *Minsu* guesthouse proudly connected this to his experience of studying in Germany and traveling around European countries, which is a typically middle-class privilege in China.

This new westernized rural landscape has become an important way for RTMs to express their middle-class identity and to distinguish themselves from local rural residents. RTMs conveyed a strong sense of pride whenever they talked about the *Minsu* guesthouses that they had designed and built, frequently comparing them with *Nongjiale* guesthouses run by local residents. While the former was seen as trendy and aesthetic, the latter was seen as showing a lack of taste. In one example, the owner of a *Minsu* guesthouse insisted on using rectangular tables in the Western style (see Fig. 7), instead of the round tables used locally. While the Western-style rectangular table was seen as foreign, stylish, and modern (*yangqi de/shimao de*), the local-style round table was deemed old-fashioned and vulgar (*tuqi de/guoshi de*). In this case, the RTM preferred Western-style furniture to more practical local-style furniture. As the chef, a local resident working for this *Minsu* guesthouse complained:

Fig. 4. (Left) The exterior of a *Minsu* guesthouse in *béton brut* style in Mingyue village.

Fig. 7. A long rectangular dining table in one *Minsu* guesthouse in Moganshan. Source: photos by the author.

'In this *Minsu* guesthouse, there was no round table when I first came. All the tables were long Western-style dining tables, which was inconvenient for having Chinese food. For example, if ten people are sharing a table, a long table, you will never be able to put the dishes onto the other side of the table. Customers have complained about it many times. I guess the owner must have known this beforehand. In my opinion, this is more of a piece of art for the owner, who cares more about aesthetic appearances than practicability.' (Interview with one local resident as chef, male, 1990s)

Beyond the westernized rural landscape, RTMs expressed their middle-class identity and distinguished themselves from local residents by following a westernized lifestyle in the villages. When asked about their experiences of life or recreation in the villages, RTMs frequently mentioned diverse activities of a Western nature, ranging from everyday practices like having Western-style coffee or desserts or drinking wine from abroad to outdoor activities like swimming, sunbathing, or even horse-riding.

Having coffee can be seen as one of the most typical aspects of Western lifestyles that have been brought to the villages. To serve the needs of the RTMs themselves and their customers with similar consumption preferences, coffee shops have started to appear in the villages. While some RTMs set up coffee shops to exclusively serve customers who stay in their *Minsu* guesthouses, others have chosen to open their coffee shops to all tourists in the villages. As one of the RTMs in Moganshan revealed:

'I like coffee. However, there were no coffee shops here in the village when we started the *Minsu* guesthouse. So, we opened the first coffee shop here in Moganshan … It was not just for ourselves but also for our customers, for whom coffee is a necessity. To be honest, local rural people do not drink coffee at all.' (Interview 1R17, male, 1980s)

Like this RTM, many other RTMs expressed their keenness on drinking coffee. Another RTM interviewed told us:

'The thing I enjoy most in this *Minsu* guesthouse is having coffee on the terrace facing the mountain in winter, when we do not have many tourists and when I can enjoy more free time. I can get spiritual relaxation by immersing myself in the cold and fresh air while having a cup of warm coffee in my hand with a faint aroma. It reminds me of when I travelled to small towns in Europe.' (Interview 1R11, female, 1970s)

For this RTM, drinking coffee reminds her of the kind of relaxed lifestyle she had experienced in European towns.

In terms of outdoor activities, swimming and sunbathing can be seen as another type of lifestyle that has been brought to rural areas through the *Minsu* guesthouse. This is especially true in Moganshan, where

almost every *Minsu* guesthouse has a swimming pool (Fig. 8). According to one RTM, the reason for the owners of *Minsu* guesthouses to build swimming pools follows the design of the villas built by foreigners (mainly missionaries) on the top of Mount Mogan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Being able to swim and having a swimming pool in the house is seen as a middle-class privilege, not only in the West but also in the Chinese context. Large numbers of photos of people swimming in the pool, and in some cases having red wine at the same time, have been posted by customers on ctrip, one of the most popular hotel booking websites in China, to advertise the guesthouses and promote an ideal way of life.

In both cases, instead of gazing upon the landscape from a distance, RTMs have engaged with the landscape through bodily practices and multiple senses, including not only the beautiful mountain scenery, but also the cold and fresh air, hot coffee, cool water, or warm sunshine.

6. Discussion and conclusion

By focusing on the landscape of the *Minsu* guesthouses in two RTM model bases, this paper has examined the ways in which RTMs have created new middle class rural landscapes in China and the extent to which these new rural landscapes are authentic. By combining symbolic and lived landscape perspectives, we have demonstrated the character of this new landscape. On one hand, RTMs produce a landscape of local character by maintaining local architectural styles and living traditional rural lifestyles in the villages. Beyond the local level, RTMs have westernized the rural landscape and brought Western lifestyles into rural China. Together, they have created a symbolically authentic rural landscape of Chinese characters, catering specifically to the Chinese new middle class.

The new rural landscape combining local and Western characters adds empirical evidence to the argument that gentrification should be understood under specific contexts considering diverse urban/rural processes (Ley & Teo, 2014; Shin et al., 2016; Waley, 2016), the Chinese new middle class, and their westernized consumption preferences in this research. The landscape of the *Minsu* guesthouses created by RTMs share some similarities with the gentrified rural landscape in other contexts in that it involves the renovation of the rural residential buildings and the transformation of the rural landscape by the newly-arriving middle class gentrifiers. However, it also demonstrates some differences. For example, it differs from gentrified rural landscape in the UK, such as the woods, the villages, and the moorland landscape (Phillips & Smith, 2021), where green and natural spaces are appreciated by rural gentrifiers. *Minsu* guesthouses are used less as residential spaces by RTMs than as consumption spaces for new middle-class consumers. Besides, it

Fig. 8. The swimming pool in one *Minsu* guesthouse in Moganshan Source: photos by the author.

differs from the postindustrial cultural space in the gentrified rural communities in the USA (Hines, 2010), in that it does not involve the transformation of the industrial rural landscape, by the post-industrial middle class gentrifiers who actively promote their visions of proper land-use practices through their pursuit of legal, political, and social actions.

The character of this new rural landscape relates to RTMs' identity as the emerging Chinese new middle class, reflecting their desire for modern and elitist lifestyles, as well as their preference for Western-style consumption activities (Elfick, 2011; Goodman and Zang, 2008; Tsang, 2014). RTMs in this research show similar characteristics to middle class in Western contexts. Like their Western counterparts, whose ideological disposition towards a gentrified inner-city and anti-suburban attitude followed the mass production of suburban areas after the Second World War (Ley, 1996), RTMs' choice of villages reflects their disapproval of the urbanization and modernization of rural landscapes under state-led rural regeneration projects in China. However, what is different is the way they consume authenticity, which significantly impacts the gentrified landscape they help to create. Challenging Western-developed concepts of 'consuming authenticity', Cao (2023) came up with the concept of *Xiaozi* consumption. While Western gentrifiers' desire for authenticity contributes to the authentic consumption spaces in immigrant neighborhoods (Hubbard, 2018), the desire of the Chinese new middle class for Western capitalist consumption habits and lifestyles – or what is termed *Xiaozi* consumption by Cao (2023)– has contributed to a new landscape of a Westernized character, such as the new rural landscapes discussed in this research. The reason for this is the specificities of the Chinese new middle class as an emerging group with increased spending powers and interests in consumerism who grew up under the impacts of economic reform and marketization since 1978 in China, and who have been significantly affected by the consumption habits of Western countries under globalization (Elfick, 2011; Tsang, 2014).

The authenticity of the new rural landscape produced by RTMs contributes to the discussion of the concept of authenticity in gentrification studies. Echoing Cohen's (1988) concept of emergent authenticity which highlights the social construction of authenticity, we argue that the new rural landscape in this research is only symbolically authentic. What this means is that it is reconstructed according to RTMs' expectations and imaginations, which results in a landscape that is only acceptable to RTMs, or more broadly to the Chinese new middle class, whose members have similar tastes as RTMs. However, such landscapes might not be considered authentic by local residents or by tourists who do not share the same tastes as the Chinese new middle class. For example, while RTMs maintained some local architectural characteristics (such as wooden structures), they gave up other local aspects of landscape characteristics (such as the use of the round table). Meanwhile, they also imported westernized architectural styles or lifestyles (like drinking coffee), none of which are authentic to rural China. Moreover, RTMs have reconstructed this new rural landscape based on their own aesthetic disposition, which fits into a broader aesthetic of gentrification (Ning & Chang, 2022). This means that the so-called authenticity is only symbolic and reflects only the kind of rural landscape or rural lifestyle that is pursued by RTMs.

While recognizing the symbolic authenticity claimed by RTMs at this stage, we remind researchers not to see this authenticity as static, but to understand it through an ongoing process of reconstruction (DeLyser 1999). The findings of this research show the initial stage of landscape change, given the limited time (about 5 years or less) since RTMs first opened *Minsu* guesthouses in the rural areas when this fieldwork was carried out. However, it would be worthwhile undertaking further research by following the steps of RTMs in other villages where similar landscapes have been created, possibly leading to a form of 'gentrification kitsch' as imitation takes precedence over authenticity (Lees et al., 2008). This is especially true as RTMs have been invited to more villages to carry out similar practices to what they have achieved in the RTM model bases. As far as we know, some of the *Minsu* guesthouses in this research have become chain brands, which have opened up branches of *Minsu* guesthouses in other provinces. Known as the founders of *Minsu* guesthouses, several owners of the *Minsu* guesthouses in Moganshan town have formed a group to start *Minsu* guesthouse groups in other places. Both cases deserve further exploration.

To conclude, this paper adds empirical evidence to a recent call for gentrification research to interact with other urban and rural processes in specific contexts instead of seeing it as a one-way transfer from the Global North to the Global South (Ley & Teo, 2014; Shin et al., 2016; Waley, 2016) based on a detailed analysis of landscape change following the development of *Minsu* guesthouses in rural China. In so doing, this research strengthens the discussion of authenticity in gentrification studies (Cao, 2023; Zukin, 2008), by examining this symbolically authentic landscape that has been produced and consumed by RTMs and the Chinese new middle class.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Peipei Chen: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Min Zhang:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Ying Wang:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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