

Reflections through a local lens on Muto Ichiyo's ideas of alternative practices: a Hong Kong perspective

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the views of Muto Ichiyo, an important thinker and social activist in Japan and the Inter-Asian context, on alternative practices through reviewing the actual implementation of several community projects in Hong Kong and mainland China. Many of these community projects are informed by visions and notions of alternative practices of, say, a “Muto type”—constructing a new democratic experience, locally rooted and globally connected, which will contribute to a transformed and transformative socio-cultural structure/relation that is non-statist and non-capitalist in nature. Through scrutinizing the effectiveness of these projects in local contexts, we hope to facilitate a dialogue with Muto on his notions of “transborder alliance of people/hope” and “alternative development”.*

KEYWORDS: Hope, alternative, people, alliance, People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21), rural reconstruction

As an architect of People's Plan for the 21st Century (PP21) that aims at facilitating an alternative world order, which he calls an Alliance of Hope, Muto Ichiyo's project is woven from four key concepts: alternative, hope, people and alliance. These four concepts are closely related and interconnected, with the first two defining the vision of the project, and the last two describing the agency and process.

Concepts: “hope” and “alternative”, “people” and “alliance”

What is Alliance of Hope (hereafter AOH)? According to Muto, AOH is

an alliance of billions of people to replace the inter-state system through transborder participatory democracy. In other words, the Alliance of Hope we envisage is nothing but a global society of tomorrow in dynamic and dialectical processes of self-generation through interactions. Alliance of Hope also envisages not just alliance amongst

large communities as such, but processes of interaction that will transform the internal life of the communities involved in favor of freedom of individuality and abatement of repressive relations. (Muto 1994)

As such, AOH is different from “the 20th century state-centered approach” to global social transformation. It is also different from issue-based strategic alliances among NGOs and social movements that are “confined to the circle of its immediate interests and contacts complemented by an abstract representation of the rest of the world” (Muto 1994). AOH is an alliance of people, in which “the people” are placed in the center of the resistance to the global dominant powers and of building an alternative world.

Muto's ideas are derived from the particular context of social movement in contemporary Japan, as well as from the general context of neo-liberal globalization. Muto believes that after the failures of the Bandung initiatives in the 1950s and of the

consortium of 130 Third World countries in the 1970s, Southern state-centered initiatives for an alternative world order had come to an end. As a result, and sharing the basic premise with the World-Systemists, Muto advocates a new perspective that takes the global structure as the unit of analysis. The objectives of social movements, according to Muto, should no longer merely be confined to the transformation of the nation-states, but should also try to democratize the global structure through the actions of "the global constituency—the people". The PP21 project is precisely such a project, one that searches for global democracy (Muto 1994).

Muto's PP21 project is also a response to contemporary neo-liberal globalization. He describes the contemporary world as an extremely polarized structure with the North monopolizing the global decision-making powers and resources, resulting in global turmoil and human/ecological devastation. He calls for a struggle against and replacing this unequal and unsustainable global structure with an alternative world order, which he calls "the alliance of hope" or "the alliance of people" (Muto 1996).

Muto's ideas of alliance of hope/people share many characteristics with the Japanese "life-politics" that emerged in the 1980s, yet AOH and "life politics" are not exactly the same thing. "Life politics" is a term Muto uses to describe social movements in Japan after the 1980s, when social activists have noticeably shifted their concerns from "macro" structures to "micro" politics. The features of the "life politics" include the flourishing of (1) ecologically concerned movements dealing with particular and concrete issues; (2) new cooperatives and the formation of alternative economic systems and life-styles; (3) community groups and women's groups that have actively participated in local political elections and are able to win a significant number of seats in municipal and other local assemblies; (4) face-to-face international interactions among people's movements, particularly those in Asia; (5) feminized social movements in which women, particularly urban

housewives, have increasingly played critical roles (such as in the anti-nuclear movement); (6) alternative cultures and life-styles emphasizing joy and pleasure, which is in sharp contrast with the old leftist emphasis on self-sacrifice.

In this new context, Muto has engaged in a constructive dialogue with the new "life-politics". Although sharing many of its concerns, Muto's main departure from the "life-politics" is that he is still looking for a "universalizer"—an alternative "common vision" or "common framework"—for diverse social movements. For Muto, "life-politics" suffers from an "enigmatic and elusive continuity-discontinuity duality," in which the "provocative element of the 1970s" that "struggled to manage to find a path to universal liberation ... to provide a common frame of reference to all the movements" was lost. Without such a common context in which diverse movements may produce "a consistent story", "a shared sense of the big picture", constructive interactions among the movements cannot take place. As a result, issue-oriented "life politics" is inclined to "indulge in permanent monologues". What Muto attempts to add to "life politics" is therefore a "new universal story", with a vision of liberation that is significantly different from the socialist past (Muto forthcoming).

Hope and alternative: the importance of a vision

For Muto, an alternative global order does not materialize automatically from the adding up of social movements working on diverse issues, as conflicts among different social groups will inevitably occur. Yet he believes that if we could synthesize differences and conflicts to a "higher level" through "dialectical interaction", differences and conflicts could be constructively articulated into "self-enriching alternative visions and programs that fully cope with the entirety of the historical problem complex" (Muto 1994). That is why he insists on the creation of a common vision among diverse social movements. We can also see the Marxist legacy in Muto's thought.

For Muto, establishing a universal vision of alternative, the Alliance of Hope, is extremely important, as this will help engender and converge the energy of agents of change in social movement circles. It could also provide a clear direction for social movements to work on. But what precisely does this new vision stand for? Or what are the meanings of “alternative” and “hope” in Muto’s views?

Alternative

Muto’s alternative vision is an economically and socio-culturally sustainable global order, in which is “a new alliance of people producing, trading, and consuming on a different set of principles in sustainable ways.” This notion of alternative global order is clearly different from conventional socialism that places the future at the center of its political project in which fundamental changes will have to wait until state power is seized by the proletariat. In contrast, Alliance of Hope “is a permanent democratization process based on ‘democracy on the spot’—emancipatory transformation of everyday relationships in the family, community, workplace, and other institutions of life” (Muto 1994). That is to say, alternative systems that constitute the new global order should be established and activated prior to, or independent of, seizing state power.

Muto uses the peace movement as an example to elaborate his notion of alternative global order:

peace means creating new relationships and situations out of the almost hopeless realities... I know that essentially peace should be understood as building new relationships. Peace should not be a simple going back to the status quo ante but creation of new social, human, and cultural relationships. Asian people’s response to the war-making Empire would inevitably come as a comprehensive movement transforming the local and national repressive, exploitative, patriarchal, and violence-ridden relationships and at once resisting and

undermining the global imperial regime ... [Peace movement] represents intense efforts to bring into the various social movements, communities, families, and societies as a whole as well as global relations distinct elements and cultures of peace and justice – demilitarization of society, non-violent ways of resolving conflicts, and elimination of exploitative, repressive, patriarchal, and exclusivist power relationships. (Muto 2004)

In other words, Muto basically defines the notion of alternative by describing what it is not—the antithesis of the conventional socialist vision and existing repressive/exploitative/patriarchal global capitalism.

Hope

For many people, Muto’s ideas of Alliance of Hope may sound like a wild dream. He admits that it is, but only in the short term. He believes that in the long run, Alliance of Hope is not only possible but inevitable, because we are increasingly forced to live together in a “single global division of labor” in which elements of hope have been ceaselessly cultivated. Muto cites the Seattle demonstration as a sign of a “new phase for people’s alliance building” that carries on people’s continuous struggle for survival through various kinds of alternative practices (Muto 1994).

The constituency of Alliance of Hope is the majority of the global population. It is only through advocating a cheerful and alternative future, one that significantly differs from what the existing capitalist world powers have promised, for everybody in the globe, can the Alliance of Hope be materialized.

Echoing Muto’s insistence on going beyond the borders of nation-states and taking the global structure as the unit of analysis, Ghassan Hage points out that in the era of globalization, the majority of the population of Western nation-states are no longer able to share the “surplus hopes” that they have benefited from in the past, as globalization has increasingly given rise to various forms of “hope scarcity”. As a

result, they are transformed into self-centered animals and "always ready to 'defend the nation' in the hope of re-accessing their lost hopes." That is why so many people in Australia support the idea of keeping out refugees.¹

Whereas Hage describes the situation of hopelessness produced by the globalization process, Muto is primarily interested in searching for an alternative to this predicament. Muto's longing for hope in the era of global hope scarcity is reverberated not only through social movements and NGOs, but also in the cultural studies circle. Espeth Probyn, a prominent gender/cultural studies scholar, writes in *The Australian, Higher Education Supplement* to report her joyful observation at the Cultural Studies Association of Australia annual conference in 2001. What she enjoyed most was the aura of hope and joy that permeated the entire conference venue. Probyn joined Ruth Barcan, a presenter at the conference who places "hope and joy at the centre of thinking about teaching," rejecting despair, shame and fear, notions that are so popular in leftist critical circles. Probyn (2001) argues that it is not particularly helpful to repeat the absurd assertion that "the more despairing a description of society, the more it's seen to be realistic," as continual despair will lead us nowhere. Drawing on Silvan Tomkins, Probyn proposes that we should distance ourselves from the "despair breeds despair" vicious circle, and learn to take pleasure in hope, or to be "exciting to be excited".

Beyond vision—"people" and "alliance"

To actualize his vision, Muto counts on the "people" as the agent of change, and alliance building as the mode of organization. "People" does not denote a ready-made sovereign body, but is a complex network of relations of differences "divided into various groups positioned differently in the global hierarchical structures, divided by gender, ethnic, religious, geographical, class, cultural, and national borders." The identities of "people" are fluid and "dynamically

changing, overlapping, and mutually interacting" (Muto 2002).

Similar to his handling of the concept of "alternative", Muto defines the notion of people by talking about what it is not. For him, people's alliance is different from the ideal of proletarian internationalism in the 19th and the early 20th centuries. In fact, this old socialist dream, based on the strategy of Southern party-state-alliance, has proved incapable of accomplishing its promises, and nation states since the 1960s have already been incorporated into the neo-liberal globalization regime.

According to Muto, the failures of the party-state internationalism logically force social movements to take people's alliance as an alternative means to the wonderland of hope. In other words, people are defined here as agents acting with relative autonomy from the parties or the state. The notion of alliance of hope/people is set against the "neoliberal globalization-forced inter-people relationship" and the "state-centric world-order" that divides and governs people. Muto also differentiates his notion of "people" from the concepts of "global citizenship" and "international civil society" that are widely adopted in social movement circles because he sees the former as too homogeneous and the latter uncritically referencing a Eurocentric notion of nation-state.

Muto's notion of "alliance" is therefore, on the one hand, significantly different from conventional coalitions of NGOs or social movements that aim at resolving particular problems or achieving short-term utilitarian interests. The latter kind of coalitions, themselves being articulated as essential elements (or building blocks) of the Alliance of Hope building processes, are already present on a considerable scale in different kinds of solidarity movements, NGO networking, farmers' movements and transnational labor organizing. On the other hand, the Alliance of Hope is not an alliance "between monolithic collectives each characterized exhaustively by a single, static identity," (Muto 1996) as in the case of conventional socialist practices.

Alliance building is an ongoing process triggered by inter-group interactions. That is the reason why Muto tries to advance the PP21 project. For Muto, one of the tasks for PP21 to accomplish is to facilitate face-to-face interactions among social activists, hoping to nurture a constructive context in which positive and cross-fertilizing exchanges can take place. Establishing this constructive context is only the first step, and further (and more important) work has to be done in tackling and replacing existing structural inequality that divides the people. However, Muto is soberly aware that not all interactions will automatically result in fruitful and positive outcomes, as "vicious-interaction is also at work." Only those that are properly stimulated and organized to effectively deepen the understanding of both the self and others may end up as liberating forces for all participants (Muto 1994). To avoid "vicious-interaction" and to facilitate genuine people's alliance, facilitators and mediators who are able to make possible a constructive process for cross border networking are desperately needed. Muto believes that there are many of these enthusiastic facilitators/mediators in social movement circles, but their experiences and thoughts have yet to be theorized and widely disseminated.

One of the models of alliance building that Muto repeatedly emphasizes is the Zapatista movement in which military strength and discursive power are co-present. The organizers of the Zapatista movement are viewed by Muto as both fighters and mediators, who are able to effectively carry out the mission of building people's alliance.

Reflections on Muto's concepts

Rethinking "hope" and "alternative"

Muto's idea of hope is different from that of Lu Xun in the 1920s. "Hope, hope—I took this shield of hope to withstand the invasion of the dark night in the emptiness, although behind this shield there was still dark night and emptiness ... Despair, like hope, is but

vanity" (Lu Xun 1925). The context in which Lu Xun wrote this frequently quoted verse was in the midst of the breakdown of the old Chinese society while a new order was yet to emerge. It was an extremely difficult context for the fostering of hope. In such a context, the strength of Lu Xun was his ability to reject illusorily optimistic visions, as well as to discard pessimistic sentiments of entrapment. By rejecting simultaneously hope and despair, there will be no room for fantasy and melancholy, as well as joy and disappointment. Lu Xun's mode of existence and way of fighting were surely not pleasurable, but certainly sustainable, as frustration and disillusionment also vanish with hope. However, life without hope (and despair) is clearly not so appealing to the majority of the global population, and the influence of Lu Xun has understandably been limited to a small circle of intellectuals. After all, hope (or fantasy) is desperately desired by countless people who live in a state of misery in the capitalist global order. And the strength of capitalism, as Ghassan Hage (2001) reminds us, lies precisely in its ability to distribute hope to these people.²

Muto is certainly right in insisting on the importance of advocating hope in this period of global hope scarcity. Yet, his view is not necessarily contrary to what Lu Xun says, although literally they appear different. Lu Xun is, despite what he says, furtively engaged in the pragmatism of struggle of his times, and his rhetoric about hope is more to provide agents of change in the social movements with a shield to fend off frustration and harden their will. Having a realistic understanding of the possibilities and limitations that we are facing will also help us define our short-term and long-term visions in a more practical, and hence sustainable, manner.

Muto's vision of an alternative global order, as presented in his English works, is outlined in the form of general principles such as peace, justice, equality, fairness, and dignity of individuals. To facilitate a vision or common framework that could be accepted by the majority of the global population, as well as by people's movements all

over the world, further questions need to be addressed: what precisely does the alternative world order, one that is non-capitalist, non-statist and "effectively lessening and overcoming the oppressing/oppressed, exploiting/exploited, and dominating/dominated relationships" mean? Could we discuss it in greater detail and more concrete terms? Of course, these are no easy questions, but addressing them is an exercise for social activists from diverse backgrounds to negotiate their different understanding of the "common vision" and contrast it with the realities they have to encounter, as well as the meaning of the endeavors they try to pursue.

Rethinking "people" and "alliance"

The word "people" should not be taken as a representative of, or a reference to, an alternative centre, taking the place of the state. In the so-called "people-oriented" discourse embedded in the humanistic tradition, the "people" is often objectified as a centre. In so doing, NGOs and intellectuals put themselves in a position to "speak for" the people by objectifying the people into an abstract standard, abstracted from the materiality of their heterogeneous existence, thus turning the people into the majority of "Nobody", whose determination depends solely on the representations of those who are supposed to be working for their well-being.³ The people-oriented approaches disavow their speaking for the people by extracting words from the people through "scientific methods" or so-called participatory approaches that unquestioningly presuppose a notion of the autonomous sovereign subject transparent to herself or himself, that is, an abstract space untouched by effective social, cultural, political and economic formations. In fact, the people by definition cannot be a majority, for its heterogeneity and collective characteristic means that it exists interactively in a state of continual variation.

Thus, while we work for concerted efforts to open up different paths other than those dictated by state functions and

processes of globalization, the heterogeneity of the people must be taken seriously. On the one hand, different groups of people are subjected to different sociopolitical configurations, are confronted by different difficulties specific to their locality, and are engaged in very different struggles on the ground. At this level, what is common among the different groups of people is that they are often excluded from mechanisms of decision making, which make arrangements affecting their very existence. On the other hand, they are subjected to the forces of homogenization (the hegemony of the American Way of Life) that rampage the earth with the spread of information technologies and TV sets. The intensive expansion of imperialism is inserted into their lives as a promise of the future, providing them materials for fantasizing the world and their future. Yet the intensive expansion is also accompanied by the extensive expansion, the source of power of which seems to be far removed from and inaccessible to them. These encounters between the people and the global forces in shaping the parameters of their resistance and the staging of their experience actually both facilitate and impoverish their subjectivities and capacity to resist and to experience at the same time.

Cross-border concerted efforts and alliances are necessary in order to confront the complicity of local authorities with the intensive and extensive expansion of globalization. In this connection, mediators are required to work for the multiplication of connections among different groups of people. It is not simply a question of representing the needs of the people and the status of their victimization. More importantly, it is a question of the staging of a forum for the various groups to interact with one another and also with the mediators, so that there can be articulated effective transformative forces for the multiplication of connections among different groups of people in the actualization of paths bypassing networks dominated by the globalization of capital. Thus, instead of issuing declarations or drawing up a

blueprint of the future society, the important work is to recognize the need to attend to micro processes at work on the ground level, which are not simply rational calculations of how to counter imperialism and colonialism, but involve affective modes that are to do with habituated ways of thinking and behaving, of relating to oneself and to one another. Unless the affective levels are also touched, there cannot be profound changes.

In other words, while it is important to work for institutional changes on the national and supra-national levels, we should also recognize that such efforts are involved in processes at a distance from those implicating the people at ground levels, engaging immediately their daily existence. That is, such efforts risk remaining caught in the limitative movements of representation, unable to open up spaces of practice for the transforming of subjectivities to escape the regulative forces of processes of globalization.

Mediation between vision and organization—a case in Hong Kong

Muto has cited a few examples, such as the Japan-Negros alternative trade encounters, to demonstrate that previous PP21 initiatives have resulted in mutually beneficial outcomes that transform “the inner life” of participating groups and individuals. It will be of great interest and value to give the specific details of how these positive encounters were facilitated, as well as what are the concrete mechanisms and processes through which emancipating effects are generated. For instance, what concerns and practices have the mediators attended to in order to prevent “vicious interaction” and destructive antagonisms? Muto proposes that mediations have to work on both the discursive level (unsettling the fixity of monolithic identity) and the structural level (facilitating structural changes for a just and equal social order), and surely, an explicit and detailed account and evaluation of such mediating work will help the learning of lessons and the exchange of experience.

Further questions could also be raised regarding Muto’s notion of “people”. The notion of “people”, as Muto says, is highly fluid, and rather than denoting concrete groups of people, it refers to a complex web of relations, and the movements are sites where the conflictual interests and interactions are teased out. The question is, can the existing hierarchical relations dominated by values and habits of global and local forces of capital and state evolve, with alternative practices or projects, alternative networks with an alternative logic? The evolvment does not mean that alternative networks can carve out spaces that are autonomous or free from conflictual interests, yet they have the potential or the orientation to give rise to a “new people”, that is, relationships sustained by values such as reciprocity, giving, and sharing. In this connection, Muto’s formulation of the “people” cannot possibly exclude party-state related institutions for they permeate our everyday life, and social change, for it to be meaningful and effective for a large number of people, must engage with mainstream sectors such as schools, mass media, small-and-medium-sized businesses. Hence, the processes and agents of change for the construction of Alliance of Hope are yet to be reviewed, described and theorized.

In the light of Muto’s insightful notion of “people” as alternative relations, we now would like to highlight what kind of intellectual work is in need by drawing on our reflections on a few community projects in Hong Kong and mainland China that in some way share Muto’s alternative vision.

PK Hui has written on reflections of community projects in Hong Kong, such as the community economic project in Wanchai (Hui 2004, the details will not be repeated here). We will, rather, ponder on some of the problems that these community projects share. Despite the following discussion that will focus more on the limitations of the project, we must highlight that this community project does produce important positive effects for the participants, including the promotion of self-confidence, the enhancement of their living standard and

quality of life, and the expansion of their social networks and their feeling "much more comfortable and empowered in this system than being a passive receiver of conventional welfare provisions."⁴

The problem, in relation to our concerns in this paper, is the fact that many participants started with a vague vision consisting of notions of justice, fairness, equality, dignity and so on. Yet people or organizations who initiated these projects were not particularly keen on clarifying what the vision (and its associated concepts) could mean in their specific social context. In the case of Hong Kong, social activists seem not eager to find out what the constituencies of their projects are, and what they really want. As a result, a commonly accepted vision simply does not exist in most of the community projects in Hong Kong.

Not having a commonly shared vision is just the first problem. What follows is the lack of a clear set of criteria that could help facilitators or organizers to understand and assess whether or not the projects are on the desirable track and are implemented effectively.⁵ As a result, much of the resources of the organizations concerned and the energy of the facilitators end up being invested in areas that are not necessarily in accordance with the vision of the project.⁶

Furthermore, the implementation and mediation work of these projects is often not very well planned, and transparent procedures and clear division of labor for effectively and efficiently running such projects are usually missing. For instance, the community exchange project in Wanchai could not enlarge its scale to provide an adequate amount of goods and services to meet participants' daily needs, because the administrative and organizational frameworks of the project are inappropriate to the handling of large-scale transaction. Without proper planning, organizational structures and division of labor, it will be extremely difficult to facilitate and maintain regular and frequent exchanges.⁷

The need for a more effective administrative and organizational framework is

also shown in the feedbacks from core organizers of these community projects, including the concerns of the demands on time and intensity of work for core members of these projects, as well as the lack of clearly spelt out obligations and commitments for participants, resulting in putting the burden of work on a few persons' shoulders. Unfortunately, this is also the problem of the PP21 project. As Muto himself points out, PP21 has suffered from the following problems: much of the work burden falls on the initiating groups, the decision-making processes are not transparent, and as a result, internal conflicts among different participants intensify.

This raises the question of whether reducing formal (or often read as bureaucratic) organizational frameworks, as well as adopting open procedures of handling strategic planning and daily operations of the project, could always produce positive outcomes. Without a commonly shared vision and clear division of labor, an effective planning, implementation and evaluation process, putting too much emphasis on "democratic" participation may engender counter-productive effects. As members come from diverse experiences and background, the decisions made by participants could very easily be inconsistent for they are largely based on different understandings of the vision of the project. As there are no clear guidelines for the commitment and responsibility of their participation, active members may express frustration when less active members rarely show up in the meetings and share the workload, and those that frequently attend meetings may have more influence on the decisions made than the less frequent participants, regardless of their commitment to and understanding of the project. In light of this, despite its correctness in principle, Muto's celebrating view on the PP21 assembly—that it "was a real activists' workshop not delimited by any institutional interests, all participants speaking up freely on an equal footing" (Muto 2004)—should perhaps be given a second thought.

Muto is certainly aware of the limitation of the PP21 organizational settings. He

points out that the “council, coordinating team, council chairs, and the secretariat under them” are “conventional” organizational structures that do not function well. He therefore proposes that there should be a new organizational form for the PP21 process. However, how this new organizational form will look is yet to be explored.

There is indeed a pressing need to create an alternative organizational frameworks to avoid the bureaucratic problems associated with the party-state, transnational corporations, and international organizations such as WTO and the UN on the one hand, and to facilitate genuine people’s alliance on the other. Yet no matter how “alternative” it is, we should not overlook the significance of serious organizational work, without which it would be hard to imagine how effective mediation can take place, especially on a global scale. Theorizing and systematically describing as detailed as possible the planning, implementing and evaluating of the process of people’s alliance building is no less important than any other social movement activities (such as face-to-face interaction), especially for projects such as PP21 that involve numerous social activists and people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. It is, of course, not an easy task, as massive (and sometimes tedious) theoretical, intellectual, as well as translation work has to be done.⁸ In this paper we suggest that clarifying a common vision accompanied by corresponding means to approach the vision—careful planning, implementation and evaluation are primordial. For that, some of the social movements’ resources may have to be reallocated from physical gathering of people (Lee 2002) to the writing and documenting of useful experiences and reflections from previous alternative practices, as well as useful experiences of mainstream institutional practices that are effective in getting work done efficiently.

Mediation between macro and micro—a case in rural China

In today’s China, after Reform for a quarter of a century, despite the metropolitanization

of certain cities and upward mobility of an emerging middle class catching up with the American Way of Life,⁹ 70% of the population remains rural labor or rural surplus labor that finds a subsistence by accepting exploitative working conditions in the cities. The term *sannong*, the three dimensions of the rural—rural population (peasants), rural area (the countryside), rural production (agriculture)—has become a catchword in the last decade, with the government also acknowledging the severity of the problems and stating that tackling the rural question is the most paramount work among all work. However, the dominant discourse, in the familiar line of developmentalism, sees the Three Rurals as an inevitable lag-behind of some sectors in China’s fast track for modernization. The blame is on the lack of education of the masses,¹⁰ the corruption and abuse of the bureaucracy,¹¹ or the inadequacy of state policies in treating the peasants with equality.¹² Hence, despite acknowledgement of this dark shadow of the Reform, the discourse does not radically critique the modernization process, but rather seeks resolution of the problems by a higher dose of modernization. Recent government policies regarding the peasants involve allowing their transfer of residency to the urban, and providing funds to train peasants for urban jobs.

Wen Tiejun, an economist in China known for his succinct analysis of the Three Rurals, has warned against naïve recipes. He argues that even if the pace of urbanization is fast and the proportion of rural population is reduced, with the increase in the total population China will still have to cope with a rural population of around 800 million who will reside in the countryside in the coming decades.¹³ It is not pragmatic to assume that urbanization and industrialization is a way out for such a huge rural- and agriculture-based sector. Although his efforts are modest, Wen initiated in 2002 a magazine, *China Reform (Rural)*, which deals exclusively about rural issues and has peasants as target readers. In August 2003, Wen launched a project for rural reconstruction and set up the James Yen Institute for

Rural Reconstruction (YIRR) in Zhaicheng Village, where James Yen conducted his experiments 80 years ago. As a convergence of efforts for rural reconstruction,¹⁴ YIRR aimed to facilitate a historical study of rural development efforts in China in the last century as well as practices of rural reconstruction in the world today, to run training programs for peasants and other learners, and to conduct experiments on permaculture, organic farming and appropriate technology on its 30-acre campus and its vicinity. When YIRR was closed down in April 2007, the project continued in a different form in the Little Donkey Farm project in Beijing.

The implications of this modest effort deserve attention, as it throws light on how a rural reconstruction project situates itself in China's context, and how it may constitute resistance to "globalization". What is implicated is not only attending to the plight of the peasants, but also challenging the viewing of peasants as backward or retrogressive in the developmentalist discourse of linear progress, as well as challenging the positioning from a centre such a discourse has to assume, thus making it possible for the elaboration and articulation of practices emerging on the margins that follow a logic and principles different from those of the prevailing processes of globalization.

A rural reconstruction project, in order not to be inscribed in the logic of developmentalism and in order to be part of the search for new alternatives, necessarily has to engage with the micro level in its attempt to counter destructive forces of modern development by Eurocentric standards and values. In its efforts to rebuild feelings of community as well as a community through collective learning towards taking care of themselves, its starting point is to work out a different path, often deviating from those of the ruling elites, from the western mode of modern development, which is not only inappropriate to countries with a large rural population, but also incompatible with values such countries are able to conceive in the course of their histories and which acknowledge the gift of

nature with due respect. Hence, rural reconstruction involves two aspects: first, it assumes the subject position of marginalized peasants and peasant communities in re-scrutinizing the promises and failures of Modernization, and resists making enunciations from the position of the ruling elite; secondly, it engages in the micro-politics of community rebuilding as an intervention into the present, allowing for the articulation of a forum out of processes that enable a multiplication of connections among the people in their interacting with one another.

The destruction of traditions and folk practices means that peasants are made to rely on agrochemicals that they have to pay for in cash. Instead of taking what is made available to them by nature in a pace authorized by nature in farming, they are now paying for fertilizers, pesticides and other modern industrial products to be used in farming for the boosting of productivity. The problem is that most peasants can never get enough return for paying back the investment in farming, even if taxes imposed on them by local authorities have been removed in the last two years. In other words, to farm is to be in debt. The ruthless path of modernization in China is also the trajectory of the "downfall" of the peasants. First, they are forced to depart from a relation of holding Nature in awe, praying for a protection of their livelihood from Nature, to a relation of plundering and destroying Nature, praying for high yield and a better market price. Then they are forced to seek work in the cities in large numbers, subjected to scandalous exploitation. There are numerous stories of peasants being cheated of their wages, or suffering from industrial hazards or accidents. It is not simply a question of their rights being violated, for their sufferings are not caused by a few unscrupulous businessmen overwhelmed by diabolic greed. It is an assemblage of various things, distributed across the world in different regions on different levels that makes their lives miserable by inflicting on them a state of emergency as a rule rather than occasionally. The question of rights is certainly important. However, in

the present context, it only addresses their problems in a formal manner, directly against the state, without questioning fundamentally the network of relations of forces underlying the movements of global processes in which the state is also implicated. Thus, it calls for a flight from the logic of these global processes that solicit their participation in their own oppression by subjecting themselves to the values of privatization and marketization that represent the land merely as an object of exploitation for profit.

The project of the James Yen Institute for Rural Reconstruction, or the Little Donkey Farm, is to limit the damages of modernization and urbanization, to reverse the drainage of resources out of the rural, to remobilize human and material potentials for the rebuilding of the rural. For this, the rebuilding of the cells, the cultural cells, of the rural community is crucial. This implicates an approach that does not simplistically advocate the building of more roads to facilitate so-called urban-rural access, or more schools to make modern selves with modern education. Such infrastructure, which has often led to further drainage of rural resources, has lamentably been part of the project of the modern nation state or foreign-funded NGOs, and contributes to further rural degeneration, disintegration and poverty. Rural reconstruction, as a cultural project, cannot but take a critical stand on modernization and developmentalism, and develop an alternative philosophy of life and ecology, of human interaction and values on the one hand, while directing itself towards the future through the cultivating of emerging processes different from the dominant discourses and practices in modern China, so as to facilitate the opening up of spaces for the production of different social imaginaries and new forms of subjectivity.

The YIRR attracted the full-time commitment of some ten young people, in their 20s and early 30s, to undertake the various tasks ranging from archiving historical materials on rural reconstruction, organizing training workshops for students, urban volunteers, and peasants, and assisting in the

formation of various groups in Zhaicheng Village and other villages.¹⁵ While such work was inevitably fraught with conflictual interests and expectations, especially in the tension between young urban organizers and the rural population in terms of the different visions, methodologies and expected outcomes, the community project thrived on the dynamics and tensions, thanks to a serious concern with the sharing of visions and notions of rural reconstruction.¹⁶ The constant mediation between the macro and the micro was an acknowledgement of the importance of direct intervention into micro processes at work at the ground level, while at the same time fostering an understanding of the various forces at work that shape the circuits of power and define arenas of constraints and possibilities.

Philip Goodchild (1996), in his introduction to the works of Deleuze and Guattari, says that at the heart of Deleuze and Guattari's combined thought lies an exploration of the possibilities of human relation, and their role in the reconstruction of subjectivity, society and environment. Goodchild further says that the obstacle that prevents social relations from developing is always the interest of some third party in the relation: conventions, values, expectations, economic structures and political entities, whether real or imaginary, provide a script for social agents who merely play out the roles. Revolution is not a matter of tearing up the script, forgetting or destroying external political and economic institutions, as well as internal conventions and expectations, for one is then left with no relation at all. Instead, revolution occurs through making additions to the script, bringing in unexpected amendments by borrowing strategies from elsewhere. Rural reconstruction may be regarded as part of such an effort of addition, which points to hope and an alternative.

An ending note

At the Bangkok 2002 General Assembly, which closed the first chapter of the People's Plan for the 21st Century', KC Lau said,

For me, PP21 spirit is alive, nurturing hope, optimism and tenacity in my work. I have learnt a lot from my interactions with friends in the PP21 movement. I hope to continue to learn especially from grassroots movements and be useful to them. For me, PP21 is first and foremost a pedagogical movement for transformative work.

The phrase "alliance of hope" has, I believe, ingeniously captured the openness of the spirit of PP21 to the making of a different future than that which can be imagined on the basis of what is prevailing now. This openness to the future, to difference, means for me that PP21 cannot be reduced to an identification with any leadership or organization. Rather, it is a call to collective efforts in the creating of manifold pedagogical sites for the working out of the spirit of openness. It is also a response to the demand of us to come to grips, in productive ways through processes of learning from one another, with the complexity of the tasks and problems confronting us. Such processes imply that prevailing structures of constraint and domination must be loosened up for the creation of favorable pedagogical sites. I believe the loosening work can have more lasting and productive pedagogical effects if it can proceed along dialogic lines, that is, through painstaking efforts of negotiation and persuasion, whether among ourselves or in relation to ruling agencies, in the offsetting of inherent coercive relations.

In short, I would see PP21 as a long-term, audaciously experimental learning process that seeks to embrace more and more agents through the induction of resonance.

Muto's ideas for hope and alliance, transcending the official end of the first phase of PP21, point to the process of consolidating links of pedagogical sites in different parts of Asia, and we believe the gist is that we have the audacity to persist in being part of such experimental learning processes—either in the Hong Kong experiment of a community project, or in the Zhaicheng

experiment for rural reconstruction in mainland China—which seek to embrace more and more agents through the induction of resonance.

Notes

1. Talking in the context of Australia at the turn of the century, in which over 50% of the population supported John Howard's "tough" stand on the refugee issue, Hage argues that the pragmatic conservatives in Australia, whose political project was to turn Australians into self-centric exclusionists, are able to capture the benefit from the sad reality that the majority Australian population "have very little hope to spare or to share" (Hage 2001).
2. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's analysis, Hage points out that Thatcher's strength resided in her ability and capacity to distribute hope, despite doing so in a racist manner, which was based on the constructed "British character". This capacity of distributing hope in the form of offering a dream of upward social mobility and the possibility of being included and in control has served as an antidote to the depressing presence of massive inequality and a sense of entrapment, and thus has facilitated the persistent accumulation of capital and kept the capitalist global order well and alive (Hage 2001).
3. "For the majority, insofar as it is analytically included in the abstract standard, is never anybody, it is always Nobody" (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 105).
4. "According to two focus group discussions conducted by the Evaluation Working Group of the project on 28 September 2002 (with five female members) and 12 October 2002 (with another six female members), many participants, mostly new immigrants from mainland China, are satisfied with the expansion of their social networks after engaging in this community exchange project. They feel that they are respected and trusted when they trade in the COME system. They also reveal that they become more self-confident, partly because their non-marketable skills such as cooking, sewing, haircutting and Mandarin speaking are recognized and valued by others, and partly because their relations with their family members have significantly improved as the whole family can regularly take part in public (exchange) activities together. Some of the low-income participants are also able to buy toys for their kids that they could not afford to purchase in the formal market. The expansion of their social networks through the COME activities also increases their chances of

finding jobs in the formal market, and in fact some of them did receive job offers. Some of them also feel empowered and self-actualized as they can perform the role of 'bosses' through setting up their own booths to sell things during monthly market fairs. Some expressed that after participating in this project, they were more willing to interact with strangers than before. Through collective purchase and the sandwich group, some members indicated that the project does did help reduce their daily expenses by receiving low-priced rice, sandwiches and second-hand electrical appliances and furniture" (Hui 2004, 227–228).

5. From our research, we find that teachers, school administrators and even government officers in charge of the education reform often have no idea how to assess the effectiveness of their work. Likewise, social activists and NGO workers also have no idea how their projects have been implemented in accordance with the original vision. This seems to be also what Lee (2002) points out about the PP21 project, that there is a "lack of holistic review process of the current situation."
6. For instance, a re-training project aiming at helping unemployed workers to return to the job market ended up spending 70% of the working time of the staff on counseling the jobless workers who have no direct connection with the mission of the project (Community Support 2003). Similarly, in our study of the implementation of a new school subject (Integrated Humanities) in two local schools, we find that most teachers and the government's curriculum development officers have also spent most of their time in doing things that are unrelated to the vision of the education reform. In another instance, a large portion of human and material resources of a local community economic development project has been allocated to the organization of social activities that facilitate the building of self-confidence, friendships and trust among participants, without being concerned with one of its primary visions—setting up a sustainable exchange system that is able to facilitate frequent, high-quality and efficient transaction among members. Even worse, the effectiveness of these activities is measured by the frequency and intensity of participation instead of the contribution of these activities to the construction of an efficient and sustainable community exchange system. It seems that similar problems are also found in the PP21 process, as revealed in a member's complaint that there were "too little agreement on views" and "too little attention was given to the decided topic" (Lee 2002).
7. As PK Hui (2004) has written, the "predicament of the system is manifested in the incapability of mediating unassimilated differences and strangers that limit the scale and scope of the project. The result, ironically, is the exclusion, wittingly or unwittingly, of non-members or less active participants. Too focused on promoting intimate communal relationships, as well as lacking an appropriate institutional setting to mediate diverse interests within the system, the project may have induced an inward looking tendency—members of the community project tend to work and relate with those they are familiar with, and are reluctant to trade with 'strangers' or 'unfamiliar faces'. The consequence could be the insulation of its members from the wider social context in which the project is situated. The exclusive nature of a closed community may also be a problem if the outcome is a collective organizational framework by which system resources cannot be channeled into facilitating outsiders and the less active members' participation. Moreover, the strong desire of 'active participation' and 'intimate relations' could induce unnecessary pressure on less active members and leave no space for different levels of commitment to the project, which is crucial for members to maintain a critical distance from the community, and subsequently to acquire individual autonomy and freedom."
8. Another kind of written and translation work that is also badly needed is people's histories and stories, as suggested by Lee (2002).
9. It is reported that within just two years between 2004 and 2006, the number of cellular phones in China doubled to 400 million. The number was 952 million in 2011.
10. For KC Lau's analysis of the well known film by Zhang Yimou, *Not One Less*, on how underdevelopment and poverty are represented as peculiarly a rural problem, ascribable to the ignorance and backwardness of the peasants, and how modern education is represented to be the recipe for getting out of poverty, see Lau and Huang (2002–2003, 1–11).
11. A bestseller in the first few months of 2004 in China is *Investigation on Chinese Peasants*, which documents stories of abuse and exploitation of peasants in Anhui Province. The investigation was conducted by two writers Chen Guidi and Chun Tao over three years.
12. See, for example, another well-known book *I Speak the Truth to the Premier*, written by Li Changping (2002). Li has called for the state to give on par citizen rights to peasants (such as residential right in the cities) so that they are not second class citizens.

13. For his situating the Three Rurals in China's modernization context, see Wen (2001).
 14. See websites www.yirr.ngo.cn and www.littledonkeyfarm.com.
 15. In Zhaicheng Village, the groups that were set up in the three years and ten months through the assistance of the YIRR ranged from a women's folk dance and drum group, an old people's health club, a farming technology group, to a peasants' cooperative. There was also a bi-monthly village newspaper, table tennis competitions, children's summer camps, recreational activities for returned migrant workers, public sanitation projects, and others.
 16. The sharing was through intensive staff planning and evaluation exercises, through workshops and training programs on a frequent basis—on average there was a major workshop or training course every two months conducted for diverse groups, and all the training would involve some discussion of the global and national context, the predicaments of modernization, as well as concrete problems and issues confronting the peasants. The workshops attempted to address both conceptual questions of modernization and immediate concerns such as how peasant cooperatives or rural finances could be organized. Most importantly, the facilitation of mutual understanding was through working together on various concrete projects in which the differences on meticulous details illuminated differences of a broader nature, and the revelation of the differences was a meaningful pedagogical exercise to the benefit of the various agents involved.
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