Global Reach

Sujiatuo township, 30 kilometers northwest of central Beijing, lies directly in the path of the swiftest, most massive urbanization in human history. As incomes rise and tens of millions of people migrate from China’s countryside, dozens of dense
Development sprawls ever-outward from Beijing (in background, right) toward rural Sujiatuo. Yu Kongjian (below) commutes from Beijing to teach a Graduate School of Design (GSD) studio course. His students Chandrani Majumdar and Daniel Stevens present their water-sensitive plan for the township in a March 10 class, before visiting China to see the site.

 Cities are spreading explosively outward and upward. The township—about 100 square kilometers of hillside orchards and flatland farm fields, where some 30,000 people live in a dozen villages—seems destined to be profitably swallowed up by the high-rise housing and high-tech facilities extending from Beijing’s Haidian district. A rail line and the city’s Sixth Ring Road already cross the site, and it is designated for development.

If the usual pattern holds, the residents will be displaced (perhaps to more modern houses) in the name of improving the “new socialist countryside,” the cherry and peach trees lost, and the flows of water that recharge Beijing’s overtaxed aquifer cut off by pavement. In an economy where even small cities routinely build gigantic new port zones and industrial parks, the loss of agricultural Sujiatuo would barely register.

But in this one case, perhaps there is an option. Sujiatuo is the subject of a spring-term studio at the Graduate School of Design (GSD). “Landscape and Ecological Urbanism: Alternatives for Beijing City Northwest” challenges a dozen students to envision futures for the township that could accommodate growth while preserving agriculture, ecological assets, and cultural sites.

More ambitiously, thanks to academic “venture capital” support from the Harvard China Fund (HCF; www.fas.harvard.edu/~hcf), the course draws on instructors based in Cambridge and China; links the GSD students to peers at Peking University; incorporates a midterm visit to Sujiatuo; and even connects the class to the planning officials who will determine the area’s fate. Much as Sujiatuo is a short story in the epic of China’s modern development, the studio provides a small window into Harvard’s academic ambitions in the People’s Republic, and around the world.

On March 10, pairs of students—one each from landscape architecture and urban planning—presented their schemes to a panel of critics in Gund Hall. Tim Wong and Irina Mladenova outlined “Rural: Urban Stitch,” a framework for melding the villages with new development while conserving farmland, wetlands, and the natural hillsides rising steeply to the west. Chandrani Majumdar and Daniel Stevens showed “Water Positive,” a design aimed at capturing runoff from the mountains, filtering it through organic fields, and increasing residents’ incomes through agricultural research and distribution of branded produce. These and the plans that followed were necessarily idealistic. They were based, to that point, on geographic databases and information gleaned through e-mail correspondence with students in Beijing. And they reflected the ambitious scope of the assignment, ranging from the details of spatial siting to an economic vision for bettering the lives of Sujiatuo’s needy residents.

But they were also guided by a bracingly realistic vision of China’s headlong growth. Studio leader Yu Kongjian, D.Dn. ’95, a visiting professor who commutes biweekly from Beijing, is co-editor of The Art of Survival: Recovering Landscape Architecture (2006), a fiercely titled argument for design based not on refined aesthetics, but on the urgent requirements of wise resource use, coexistence with natural systems, and sustainability.

Yu puts those principles into practice both as founding dean of the Graduate School of Landscape Architecture at Pe-
king University and as founder of Turen-
scape (www.turenscape.com), a 500-per-
sion design firm. Its projects extend from
major urban assignments throughout
China to the Chinatown portion of Bos-
ton's “Big Dig” Greenway. Many are distin-
guished by inventive recycling of indus-
trial sites, and by use of emphatically
ecological techniques, from restoring nat-
ural waterways to planting indigenous
species and practical materials (including
rice)—not showy flowers.

“The development is inevitable,” Yu
says of Sujiatuo and other sites in “the
backyard of Beijing.” But in a country that
has confined its rivers between concrete
floodwalls, grossly polluted their waters,
and is now urbanizing much of its best
farmland, he says, “We have to redefine
the taste.” In that modest phrase, he chal-
ges both Chinese tradition—landscape
as an art for elite contemplation—and the
contemporary engineering momentum
that muscles nature aside in pursuit of in-
dustry and urban expansion.

Now the students in the course he
teaches (with Toronto-based landscape
architect Jane Hutton and Stephen Ervin,
lecturer in landscape architecture and
GSD’s director of computer resources)
would face the challenges of Sujiatuo itself
during a spring-break trip to Beijing.

Perhaps no cityscape better symbol-
izes the new China than Shanghai’s Pu-
dong district. A towering metropolis with
wide boulevards, multimillion-dollar con-
dominiums, the iconic 101-story World
Financial Center, and the rising 128-story
Shanghai Tower, it has sprung up on the
east bank of the Huangpu River since the
mid 1990s.

President Drew Faust, Harvard Busi-
ess School (HBS) dean Jay O. Light, GSD
dean Mohsen Mostafavi, and a delegation
of faculty and staff members traveled to
Pudong for meetings with alumni, friends,
and local officials on March 17 through 19
(following an extended alumni-relations
visit to Japan). The focal events were a
day-long academic symposium
and banquet on March 18, of-
ically commissioning the Har-
vard Center Shanghai. That
ambitious facility, an HCF-HBS
joint venture, signals a strong
University engagement with
the People’s Republic: it con-
tains spaces for visiting profes-
sors and for students pursuing
internships or public-service
and research opportunities, and
even a fully equipped HBS-style
classroom, where the school can
work with Chinese partners to
offer advanced-management
courses and customized corpo-
rate-training programs.

The facility (Harvard’s largest
international outpost apart
from the Center for Italian
Renaissance Studies at Villa I
Tatti, near Florence) is fully in
step with twenty-first-century
China. It occupies the entire
fifth floor of the International
Financial Centre—a César Pelli-designed,
LEED-gold-certified twin-tower office
complex plus hotels and retail mall—on
a 16-acre site near the apex of Pudong.
(The project is being built by Sun Hung
Kai Properties Ltd., Hong Kong’s preemi-
nent development firm; vice chairman
and managing director Raymond Ping Luen
Kwok, M.B.A. ’77, serves on the HCF ad-
visory group and he and his wife, Helen,
are recognized by a plaque in the Harvard
center for their role in helping to site it.)

Photographs by Stephanie Mitchell/Harvard News Office

Harvard Center Shanghai is in the new office
tower to the left (top); the 88-story Jin Mao
Tower and 101-story World Financial Center
rise to the right. Harvard’s facility has a fully
equipped teaching theater (above). President
Faust and GSD dean Mostafavi take in the city
model at Shanghai Urban Planning Exhibition
Hall (left) on March 19.
In opening the academic presentations, Dean Light acknowledged HBS’s significant international enrollments and the fact that a half-dozen professors can understand Mandarin and a few can even teach in it. (Anticipating enrollment of many Chinese-language speakers, the new center’s classroom offers simultaneous translation.) He noted that HCF’s chair, William C. Kirby, with dual appointments in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and HBS, serves as the ideal bridge to expertise on China from throughout the University.

Then Krishna G. Palepu, HBS senior associate dean for international development, who studies emerging markets and globalization, explained how the Shanghai center embodied an elaboration of HBS’s global strategy by moving beyond the small research centers established around the world during the past 15 years to a teaching facility—a place for education in diverse disciplines. He called it fitting that the Harvard flag be raised in Shanghai because great universities have always been located in nations with great economies, from medieval Italy to Germany and Great Britain to the United States and now throughout Asia.

Keynote speaker Kirby—the Chang professor of China studies and Spangler Family professor of business administration—addressed “The Chinese Century?” An historian, he immediately put the glittering surroundings in context. In the 1920s, he recalled, Shanghai’s Bund stood for the city’s rising commercial presence. “Then war, civil war, and Maoism led to Shanghai’s utter stagnation” until early in the last decade, when the city “awoke from its buried past,” following “the ruinous policies of the first 30 years of the People’s Republic….?” Despite those traumatic decades, he found in China’s military successes in the 1940s and 1950s the impetus for its rise to great-power status now, and

Vincent Brown

When Vincent Brown went on the job market eight years ago, he almost took his films—a few short comedies, nothing academic—off his CV for fear of not looking like a “serious” scholar. “It’s a good thing I didn’t” leave them on, the professor of history and of African and African American studies says now, because the search committee at Harvard viewed this multimedia experience as an asset. Indeed, these earlier films laid the groundwork for one of his two major academic projects to date: Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness, a documentary that he produced based on his own research, aired on PBS earlier this year and has won numerous film-festival and academic awards. The late Melville Herskovits, a Northwestern University anthropologist whose books include The Myth of the Negro Past, documented cultural continuities between African societies and slaves in the Americas, and helped change the notion, popular in academia at the time, that there was nothing of worth to be found in African culture. Brown says the “gorgeous” footage Herskovits shot (of dances, music-making, and agricultural techniques, for example) made film the right medium for telling this story. His second project is in a more conventional format: a book on the meaning of death, and the rituals surrounding it, in the society of Jamaican slaves and slaveowners. Brown’s next book project aims to connect slaverevolts in the Americas with concurrent political developments in Africa, following in the footsteps of Herskovits, whose name is still little-known despite his seminal contribution to the discipline of African American studies. He is, says Brown, “one of the most important scholars you never heard of.”
in its capitalist flowering at the beginning of the last century the roots of its new economic efflorescence.

Kirby reviewed the government’s success in building infrastructure and the dynamism of Chinese entrepreneurs. He highlighted the remarkable expansion of Chinese higher education—“a great and welcome challenge to American universities”—and raised the critical issue of academic governance: the degree of autonomy granted to institutions, public and private, to pursue their “broader public purpose” of educating leaders for the future—a mission, he said, that two “not-quite-democratic institutions,” Harvard and China, pursue together.

Looking ahead, Kirby foresaw a century “for all of us, in a world of shared aspirations and common problems.” In the past, he said, “We used to say about the Chinese-American relationship, in so many areas, that we were tong chuang yi meng (sleeping in the same bed, while dreaming different dreams)...We are without question now, together, embedded in a global system of learning and teaching...from each other, as never before, and sharing many, if not all, of the same dreams” tangibly in the Harvard Center Shanghai.

One of Kirby’s themes—acknowledgement of China’s development, but frank recognition of past costs and continuing challenges—sounded throughout the day. In “Architecture and Urbanism,” GSD dean Mostafavi, as moderator, asked the panelists how India and China could cope with their “phenomenal processes of urbanization”—prompting expressions of concern about pell-mell construction of trophy skyscrapers without regard for livable community (evident in the immediate environs of Pudong) and about the loss of historic structures and farmland.

Carswell professor of East Asian languages and civilizations Peter K. Bol and professor of Chinese literature Tian Xiaofei asked, “Who Cares about Chinese Culture?”—illuminating the ways
American and Chinese cultures reveal their multiple and shifting meanings and applications when brought into contact with one another. Barry R. Bloom, past dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, and colleagues explored “China’s Newest Revolution: Health for All?” After noting that life expectancy had tripled during the past century, Bloom pointed out that the opening of China’s economy to market forces in 1978 had resulted in the wholesale shift of healthcare costs to private payments, with devastating effects on rural health, widening gaps in access as incomes diverged, and perverse incentives for doctors and hospitals that led to abuse and enormous overuse of drugs and other therapies. Health reforms announced in 2009 promise to correct many of these problems, he said. But corruption, weak regulation, and deep-seated social challenges—from inadequate care for the burgeoning aged population to persistently high rates of suicide and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases—may not prove easily tractable.

At day’s end, Starr professor of international business administration David B. Yoffie, who chairs executive education at HBS, outlined the compelling technologies—from mobile to “cloud” computing—that he sees propelling growth. That same day, China Mobile reported adding 65 million subscribers in 2009, bringing its total to 322 million—half the country’s user base; Verizon and AT&T, the U.S. market leaders, each have about 85 million cellular customers overall.

A framed work of calligraphy in the Harvard Center’s lobby presents a passage by Gu Xiancheng, a leader of the Donglin movement of the early 1600s—reformists’ attempt to invoke Confucian moral tradition to improve life during the decline of the late Ming dynasty. As translated by Bol, the passage reads:

Use moral principles to take charge of profit-seeking. Use profit-seeking to assist moral principles. Combined to complete each other, they will form a single stream.

That seems a fitting exhortation as Harvard tries to apply both liberal arts and professional disciplines to research and learning in China—and to China itself, as it relies on an unfettered market to grow, while adapting values and customs to its people’s lives today.

These principles, applied in specific context during the panels on urban development, healthcare, and other topics, were explicitly the subject of the lunchon address. Bass professor of government Michael Sandel, whose course “Justice” has reached wide audiences in book and video versions, spoke on “The Moral Limits of Markets.” Whatever their differences, he said, both the United States and the People’s Republic face the predicaments arising during the past few decades as market thinking, institutions, and values have reached into spheres of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms. But “markets are not mere mechanisms,” he claimed, and can taint the goods and social practices they come to govern: he cited for-profit schools and prisons; the sale of organs and access to transplants; and, in China’s hospitals, the sale of appointments to be seen by a medical professional.

“Markets leave their mark,” Sandel asserted: once a good or service is for sale, it is valued as a commodity, abstracted from moral or political considerations. During an era of “market triumphalism,” he said, people had drifted from “having a market economy to being a market society”—a transition that many have accepted without reflection, given markets’ power to organize valuable productive activity. It was a challenging message within the ballroom of the Pudong Shangri-la, an impeccable outpost of China’s foremost luxury hotel chain—its concept that would have been oxymoronic when Sandel began teaching political philosophy at Harvard in 1980.

In her evening address, President Faust built upon the details of Harvard’s history of educational involvement with China: some 250 Chinese earned Harvard degrees between 1909 and 1929, she noted, and more than 1,200 students and scholars from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan enrolled or visited last year; the law and
medical schools have been active in China for a century; and Harvard experts now work with their Chinese academic peers and government officials on health policy, pollution control, and a wide array of arts and sciences.

More broadly, she said, “In a single decade, along with the world’s fastest growing economy, China has created the most rapid expansion of higher education in human history.” In that growth she saw “unimagined possibilities for understanding and discovery. It is a race that everyone wins.” Importantly, she stressed, those possibilities lie not only within the vital realms of applied and professional knowledge, but also in the sphere of “creative and critical thinking… unfolding not from a fixed model or prescribed solutions, but from vivid debate and unorthodox thinking.”

Faust illustrated that passion by citing journalist Theodore White’s recollections of his “swift passage from Harvard to China” as a first-year student in 1934. To escape the crowded Western Civ. reading room in Boylston Hall, she said, White crossed the corridor to the empty Yenching Library; there, “bleary with reading about medieval trade, or the Reformation,” as he put it, he began to “pick Chinese volumes off the shelves—volumes on fine rice paper, blue-bound, bamboo-hooked volumes with strange characters,” until he himself became hooked and “I began to feel at home.”

In that era, East Asian studies was, as Faust put it, “a discipline centered on Chinese antiquities” of the sort that bewitched the young White. Today, the University offers more than 370 courses in the field—and students and scholars seemingly will need all of them to promote true understanding between the United States and China.

In the week of the Harvard party’s visit, China Daily, which reflects government and Party views, was filled with furious critiques of American policy. “Politicizing yuan exchange can’t fix Sino-U.S. trade imbalance” read one op-ed—over a cartoon of a physician listening to the heart of an obese “U.S. Economy” figure and asking, “Is this the Chinese yuan, again?” An editorial on Google and Internet access said the issue had “become a tool in the hands of vested interests abroad to attack China under the pretext of Internet freedom”—“an absurdity…beyond comprehension and… intolerable.” An official report on “The Human Rights Record of the United States in 2009” (a response to the U.S. State De-
A few days into reading period last semester, Tej Toor ’10 presented her final project for Computer Science 50. She had created a very simple website, called “I Saw You Harvard” after its inspiration, “iSawYou.com.” iSawYou is a “missed connections” site, a sort of hybrid between a personals section and “America’s Most Wanted.” The idea is that if you see someone in the Square who catches your eye, but disappears before you can get a name, you can write about it on I Saw You Harvard and have at least some chance, however remote, of getting in touch.

Lamont bottom floor

I saw you...Blond, I think, heading downstairs in Lamont. I was looking through a window, and you were looking at me through the glass door. Who are you?

or

At my boring job...

I saw you...at work. I always try to pick up shifts I know you’ll have so we can talk. I asked you to hang out the other day but you had a paper...hopefully next time you’ll be free. Although now I’m nervous to talk to you and ask...

The site proved a huge success, spurred on, doubtless, by the fact that it provided the entire College with a convenient and addictive distraction from reading period and exams. Those first few days saw a frenzy of “sightings,” as posts are called: some 2,400 lovelorn utterances issued forth from the laptops and iPhones of Harvard undergraduates in that first incredibly busy week. It’s a marvel that the University’s Wi-Fi network didn’t burst at the seams, but disappears before you can get a name, you can write about it on I Saw You Harvard and have at least some chance, however remote, of getting in touch.

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It quickly became clear, though, that very few of the posts were missed connections in the strict sense. More frequent were the unspoken, nondescript crushes...