



No place on Earth is urbanizing as fast as western and central China, and the Go West Project documents the dazzling and sometimes disturbing rise of global megacities of the future. Kerri Pang reports.

# Rise of China's global megacities

China's east coast and its powerhouse cities are world famous, but its future lies west in its heartland and hinterland where global cities are rising fast. They are the new powerhouses that generate economic wealth and social improvement — but also dislocation and dissatisfactions.

Since early 2009, Dutch architect Daan Roggeveen and journalist Michiel Hulshof have been working on the Go West Project, documenting the transformation of China's dynamic interior and visiting 16 cities that are little known now but will make headlines soon.

The two founded the project and have written "How the City Moved to Mr Sun — China's New Megacities," which is to be published in September.

Their website explains, "Twenty years ago Mr Sun was a simple Chinese farmer. Today he owns a block of flats in the center of a city of millions. And he didn't move an inch."

"People need to understand that China is creating the biggest urban society globally," Roggeveen tells Shanghai Daily. "These cities are developing at a breakneck pace, and can potentially conquer the world."

Architect Roggeveen has been working on projects in China and Europe; journalist Hulshof who is working in Shanghai is China correspondent for the Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland*. Two years ago they got the idea for the project when they were discussing China's development and urbanization.

"Within the hour, we both had a clear view on how it wasn't in the coastal cities but central China where the big opportunities lie," says Roggeveen, who also works in Shanghai.

They aimed to capture the development and transformation of central and western China and its largely unknown cities, using crossover research methods and exploring cities from both a structural and social perspective.

"Although central and western China are one of the most thrilling places in the world right now, it is not very much understood. Nevertheless, those cities are crucial in the development of China over the next decade," Roggeveen says.

Their project includes the book (featuring 13 cities through photos, journalistic stories and graphics), essays, photo essays, speeches, seminars and other activities.

Their first stop was Zhengzhou,



Left: Go West Project team member Vivian Song (right) and co-founder Michiel Hulshof (second from right) visit a local family in Lanzhou, Gansu Province.



Right: Dutch architect Daan Roggeveen (left) and journalist Michiel Hulshof

Left: An elderly woman does morning exercise while her granddaughter plays nearby on an open square in Zhengzhou, Henan Province. In the background is the construction of new high-rise apartments.



capital city of Henan Province. They realized that the development was astonishing and returned to Shanghai determined to visit 15 other cities, focusing on a theme in each.

They explored the lives of the wealthy in Changsha, capital city of Hunan Province, migration trends in Chongqing Municipality in the southwest and ethnic culture and urbanization in Hohhot, capital of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

"In every city, we had a different story. The patchwork of stories completes one cloth that describes the transformation of central and western China," Roggeveen says.

In Kunming, capital of Yunnan Province, the team concentrated on preservation of historic districts, especially after realizing that the population climbed from 1 million to 4 million in a decade.

"We found that there was a big pressure on the market to build skyscrapers, instead of preserving *lao fang zi* (old houses)," says Roggeveen, who speaks some

Mandarin. "We spoke to everyone related to the development of the city — preservationists wanted to keep the old buildings, local shop owners objected as the buildings were so old, dirty and lacking fresh water, while other residents demanded for compensation. Reality is complicated, but very interesting."

Interestingly, the Go West Project also found its third team member, Vivian Song, on a visit to Shijiazhuang, capital city of Hebei Province.

Song was born and raised in the city and the 24-year-old was intrigued by the project.

"I would never have gone to those cities if I didn't work with the Go West Project. Chinese people would rather travel to see the coastal cities, since smaller cities in central and western China seem more generic and lacking in cultural attractions," Song says.

The Go West Project demonstrates these cities are far from what people perceive them to be.

"The hardest part of the project

was to stay focused, because these cities engage all your senses. It's very tempting to stop at every street corner to see what's happening," Roggeveen says.

In Hohhot the team developed an extensive network of contacts as they examined the impact of urbanization on Mongolian culture.

"We ended up meeting a *ma tou qin* (horse-head fiddle) player — the fiddle is a typical, very beautiful Mongolian instrument — and he mentioned that his master was in town. He turned out to be Chi Bulag, the musician of Mongolia," Roggeveen says. "When we told people the next day that we had dinner with Chi Bulag, they were shocked."

Roggeveen and Hulshof have been lecturing on their project at universities in Europe and Shanghai. They were invited to the University of Hong Kong in Shanghai by Liu Yuyang, an architect and associate professor who was interviewed for the project.

"In the Western academic field, no one else is currently doing

the same type of work with both architecture and journalism. The fact that they work in tandem makes it a good combination, as that is how a city evolves — socially and structurally," Liu says.

Liu says the question his students kept asking was why two Westerners were interested in the heart of China and its development.

"That's where the irony is," says Liu. "While local Chinese regard those cities as old and familiar, Westerners see the potential and enter with a totally fresh perspective."

"(It) lifts the veil from these unexplored megacities. It lays bare the ruthless logic behind this incredible growth, and presents in loving detail the mass of humanity washed up in this unstoppable process: farmers who demolish their homes and build their own high-rise apartment blocks, torn down again by city authorities in the name of progress," as the Go West Project website says of "How the City Moved to Mr Sun."