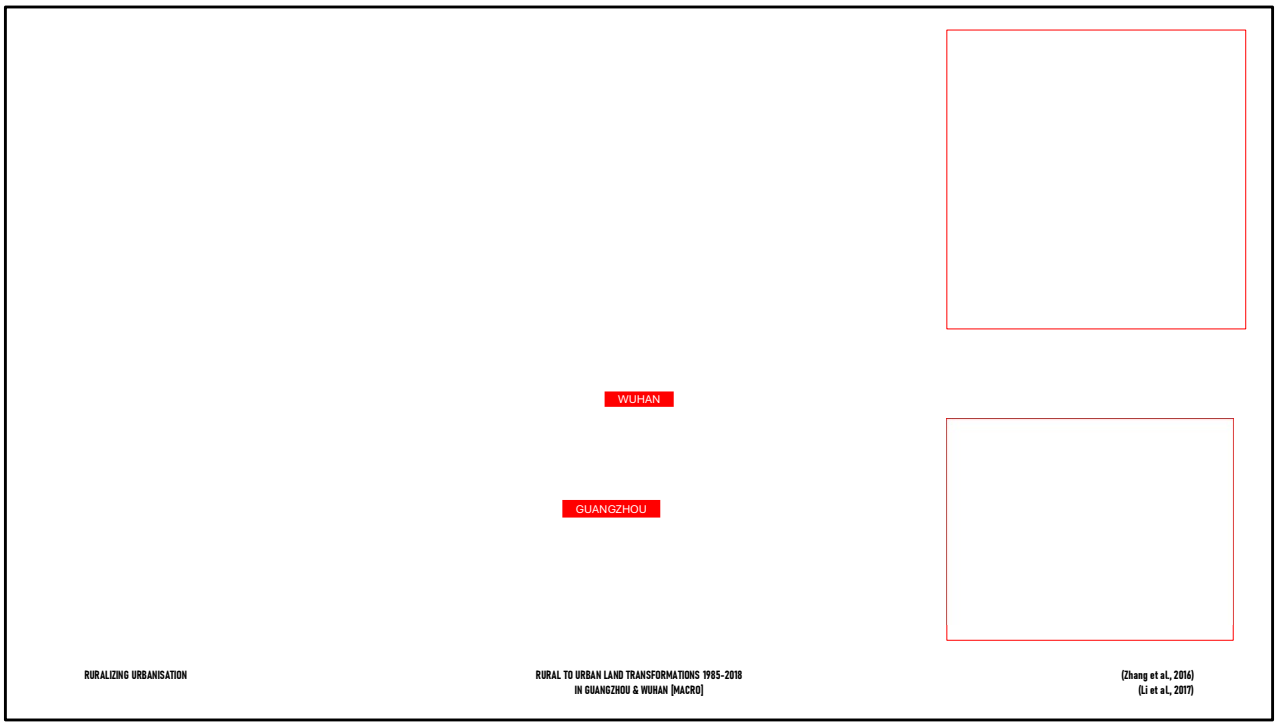
Good afternoon, thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. My name is Hanxi Wang, I'm a PhD candidate in the department of human geography, at University College London. My research is an attempt to trace these hidden constellations of metropolitan spaces being re-agrarian-ized by ordinary individuals who have emerged seemingly spontaneously without any formal organization or support, and through it, tries to understand the presence of the 'rural' / 'agrarian' within the metropolitan landscapes produced by dramatic processes of urbanization.



As you all know, China has undergone a significant urbanization in the last few decades. In this transformation, over half of the accelerated urban expansion that has created the country's large cities, megacities, and super megacities has been built on rural cultivated land. Over 400 million rural residents have moved permanently to cities, with roughly 295 million migrant workers "floating" between the country and the cities. As such, though China appears to have completely changed from its rural past, its long agrarian history remains a foundational part of its material reality. Though this foundation is generally understood to be part of the past, this paper questions whether this really the case. And as urbanization expands into territories beyond the city, whether the inner core of this urbanization is as robustly urban as we might assume.

RURALIZING URBANISATION KAIHUANG – OPENING URBAN WASTELAND HANXI WANG

To do that, I look at the behaviours of a really very simple practice in two Chinese megacities, Wuhan, the largest city of the central China region, and Guangzhou the largest city of the south China region. The practice is called “kaihuang” by its practitioners – meaning the opening of wasteland – where one encounters a piece of land that is “wasted” – i.e. unused, unproductive, fitting neither the expectations of the urban nor the rural – and decides to turn it into productive land for growing vegetables. In itself, kaihuang is perhaps neither revolutionary nor radical, as Nathan McClintock points out, agrarian practices have always existed in cities, and not only during wartime. Yet despite this, there is something uncomfortable about the way this agrarian presence sits within our conceptions of the city, where it is either divorced from its “rurality” and subsumed under the category of the “urban” by virtue of its physical location in the city, or it is considered a “misplaced other” that does not belong in the urban.

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Where in reality, I think the relationship between city and the “non-urban” is much more entangled than one might imagine. Within the sizable body of social media content concerning kaihuang practices in China, one local news account posted the headline “rural methods live in the city, urban planning live in the village.”

In some of the sites studied in my research, the aesthetic recognition of kaihuang as “rural” by urban management offices has led to the demolition of vegetable gardens and replacement with “urban” land uses such as parking lots.

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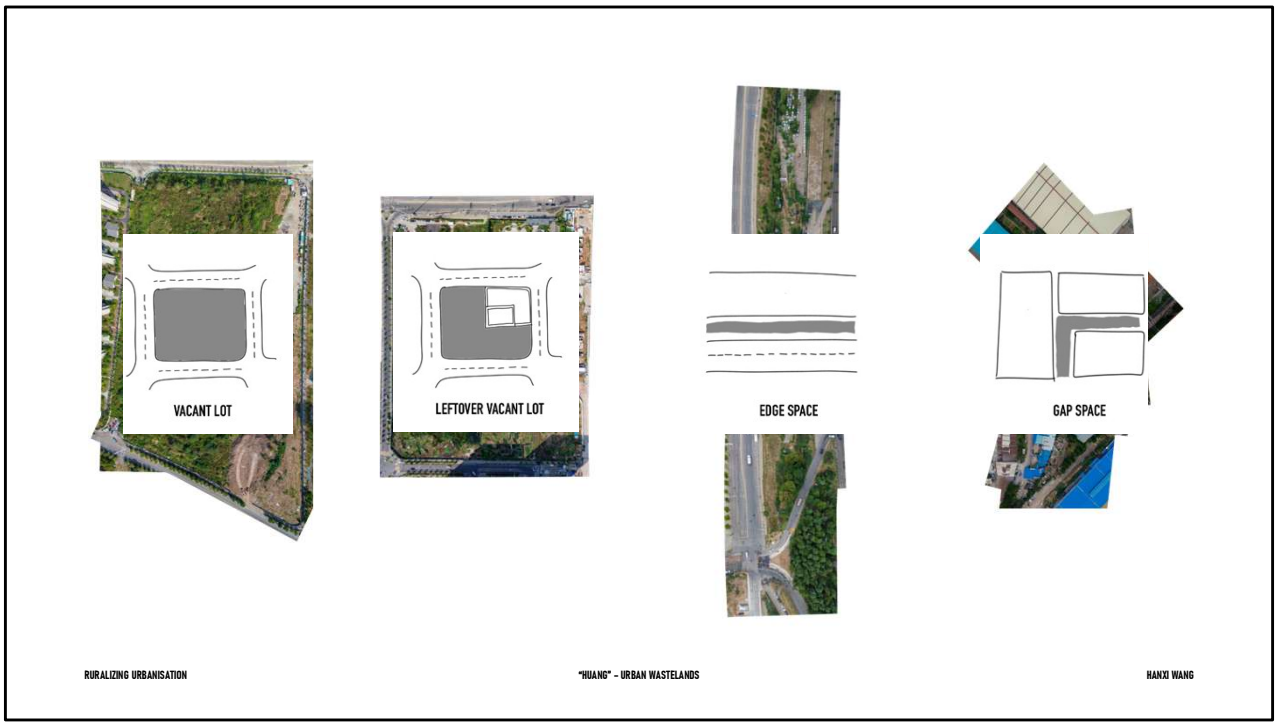
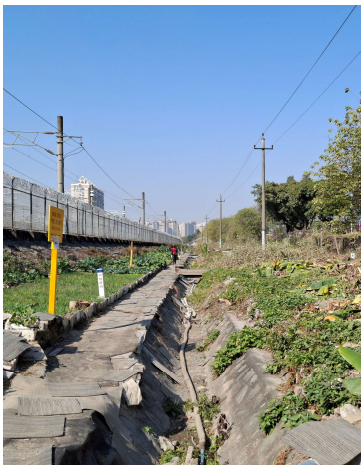
But I have also found a significant number of sites which have been left undisturbed for up to 2 decades under the passive tolerances or even tacit agreements of local offices.

Across the 120 sites of kaihuang I visited for fieldwork in the last 8 months in the cities of Wuhan and Guangzhou, I saw the ways that “rural” practices, bodies, and knowledges were transforming urban wastelands into agrarian landscapes, creating a network of spaces and environments that are beyond modernity’s abstract definitions of the “urban”, and yet is very much part of and connected to the flows of people, materials, and operations within the city.

And so, to understand these presences beyond the rural/urban binary, and to see the ways in which agrarian practices such as kaihuang do not merely adapt to the urban, but also transform it, this paper borrows the term “ruralization” from Monika Krause’s essay ‘the ruralization of the world’ and Gillen et al.’s theoretical formulation of the ‘geographies of ruralization’, which propose that ‘rurality’ does not simply disappear as people move to cities, but continue within urbanization processes in more-than-residual ways. And uses the term to study the complexities of this simple phenomenon’s presence in the city. It does this, not to argue that the city is become “rural”, but as a provocation to move away from the “urban-centric” understanding of the city.



The two cities provide the opportunity to understand kaihuang emergence within two quite different context of urban growth. For one, In Wuhan, kaihuang is found generally in the speculated, expropriated and demolished land lots created in the process of the city's ambitious land banking for urbanization. Whereas in Guangzhou, a more densely developed city where such empty lots are less common, kaihuang takes place in the edges between the city and its infrastructure and the gap spaces leftover inside and between developments.



RURALIZING URBANISATION

MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE

HANXI WANG

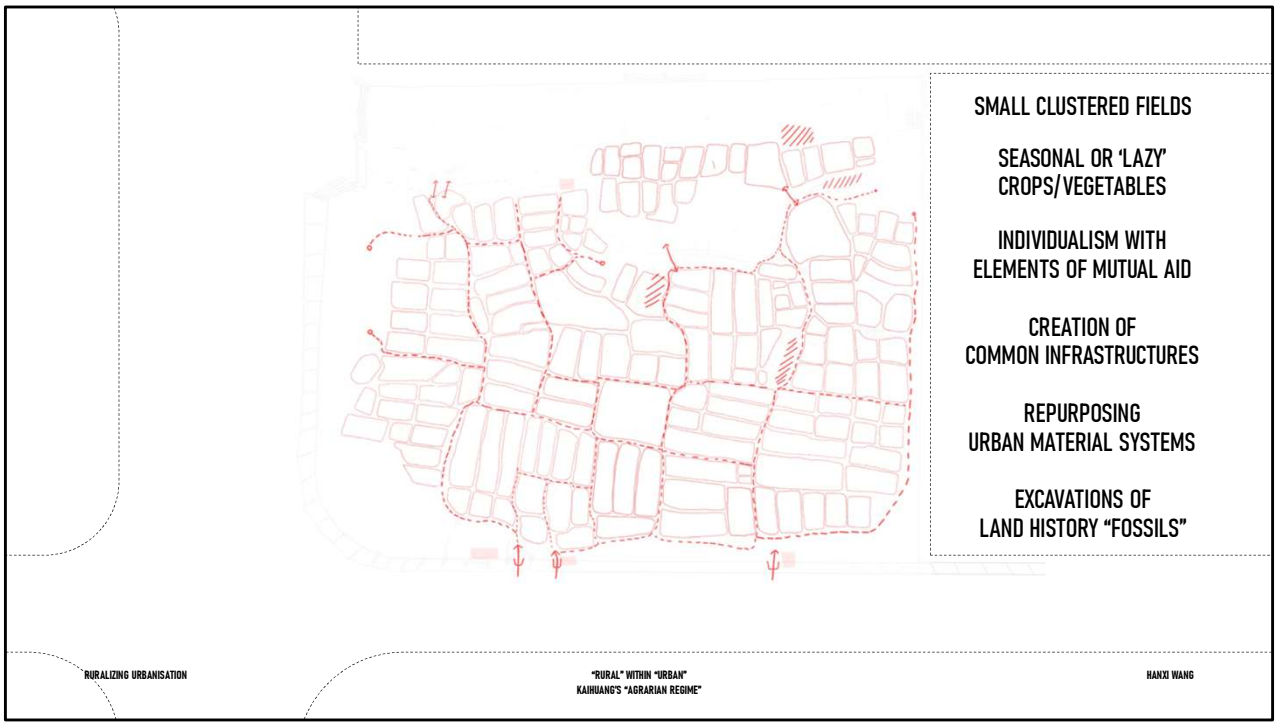
It became apparent that kaihuang occurred more frequently in certain urban institutions than others. Particularly in those that both consistently bring in migrant populations outside of the city and that possess significant holdings of land within the city but with less inclinations to participate in capitalist land development. For example, the military, which regularly brings in soldiers and their family members from other provinces, higher education institutions who bring in teachers and their families, and national state-owned corporations that brings in employees from other branches and offices.

In both cities, interviews with cultivators revealed that sites were autonomous independent spaces that did not actively coordinate their practices with other kaihuang spaces. Yet, a recognizable @agrarian regime@ emerged across them that, I think, potentially creates a common language of agrarianism and an unintentional rhizomic network of agrarian landscape across the city as a result of the similarity of their socio-ecological circumstances and common knowledges of agriculture.

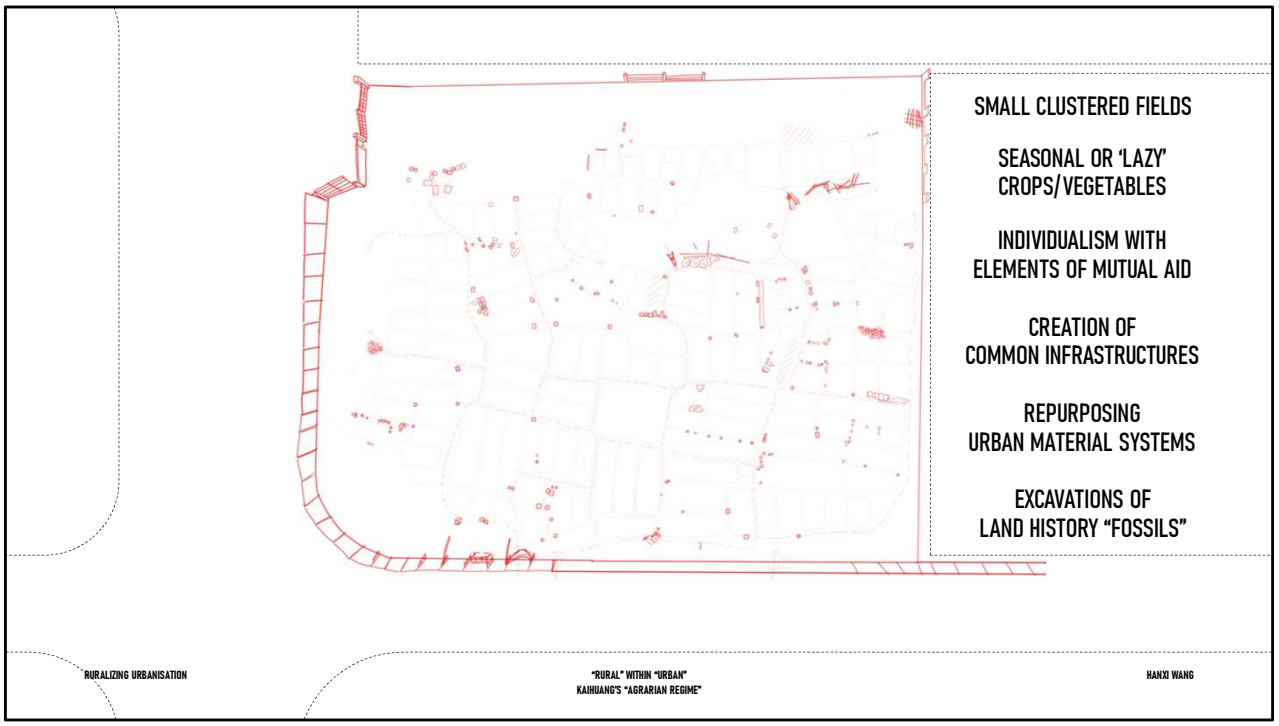
To go through some of them briefly here: kaihuang sites are uniformaly marked by this intricate organic pattern of small lots. Even though there is no formal mechanisms that limit the amount of land that each individual cultivator can claim, the intensive amounts of manual labour required in vegetable cultivation encourages the establishment of small conservative lots that increases in number very gradually. This also leaves space and time for other cultivators to come and as a result most kaihuang sites I came across were managed by a multiplicity of people rather than being monopolized by individuals.

As cultivators are usually unsure how when their use of the site might be terminated, most opt for the growing of particular species: i.e. seasonal, fast-growing vegetables and crops that provide higher chances of harvest. Additionally, as soils are usually of lower quality due to the urbanization processes of demolition and excavation, more hardy crops such as sesame, asparagus lettuce, spring onion, chives, peanuts etc, are usually preferred over crops like tomato or cucumber which have higher demands on the availability of water and soil quality.

Cultivators work independently, each tending to their own established lots without interference from other cultivators. It was not uncommon to find lots which have been completely enclosed and made private by individual cultivators. Yet the sites maintain certain elements of mutual aid through the sharing of tools, seeds, and the gifting of harvests to each other.



In the gradual cumulative formation of individual lots, common infrastructures such as water irrigation channels, walking paths, and methods of access into the kaihuang sites are tacitly created, shared, and maintained by individuals.



Repurposed urban materials are abundant in kaihuang spaces, such as urban signs, posters, furnitures, organic wastes from markets and homes, even the very barriers erected by the city to prevent access into the spaces in which kaihuang takes place are hacked by cultivators in creative ways and transformed into tools for agrarian cultivation.

And in the stark contrast to the physical processes of urbanization, where land and its histories (both human and natural) are obscured and made into anonymous, flat tabula rasa ready for forms of development, kaihuang spaces are marked by their accumulation, excavation, and reuse of the various histories of the site. For example, the remnants of their rural past, reactivating the land's natural mechanisms (in this case, taking advantage of Wuhan's natural history as a wetland, cultivators dig deep trenches into the soil to collect ground water), and also collecting and repurposing some of the land's past urban constructions such as the footings of worker dormitories being repurposed as raised beds, or the excavation of buried debris from demolished houses that reuse as small barrier walls.

RURALIZING URBANISATION CONNECTING BEYOND THE SITE HANXI WANG

Even though the interiors of each site appear isolated from the public experience of the city through buffer spaces, fences and walls, I was surprised to find that they are in fact often in contact with the larger city. For example, They are highly visible to urban residents and office workers by virtue of the tall tower typology that dominates China's urban landscape. And they are known and accessed on daily basis by street cleaners, trash collectors, the friends and families of kaihuang cultivators, as well as un-cultivating residents who come to such sites to buy produce. The vegetables produced within kaihuang spaces also travel outside of the boundaries and into the homes of city residents through the infrastructure of vegetable markets that permeate the Chinese cityscape.

Without organization, the presence of kaihuang across hundreds of city wastelands appear to take place through replication. Most cultivators I interviewed said they began kaihuang because they saw somebody else doing it. As multiple individuals learn from each other's experiences, both passively by observing or actively by communicating, kaihuang can emerge, seemingly independently, across many "wastelands" around the city. While the kaihuang cultivator's "agrarian regime" remains largely consistent in this replication, it is also constantly adapting to the particular shapes and characters of each site.

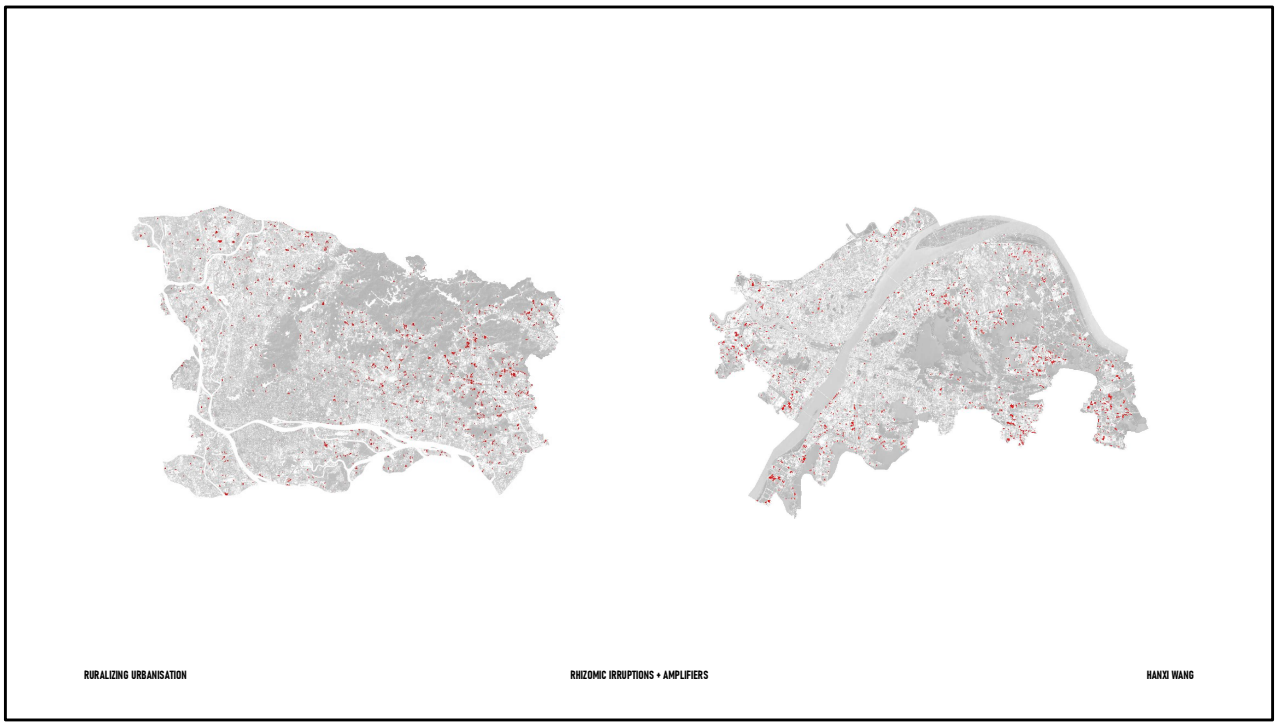
This replication leads to the propagation of kaihuang across similar land conditions such as transportation infrastructures

RURALIZING URBANISATION

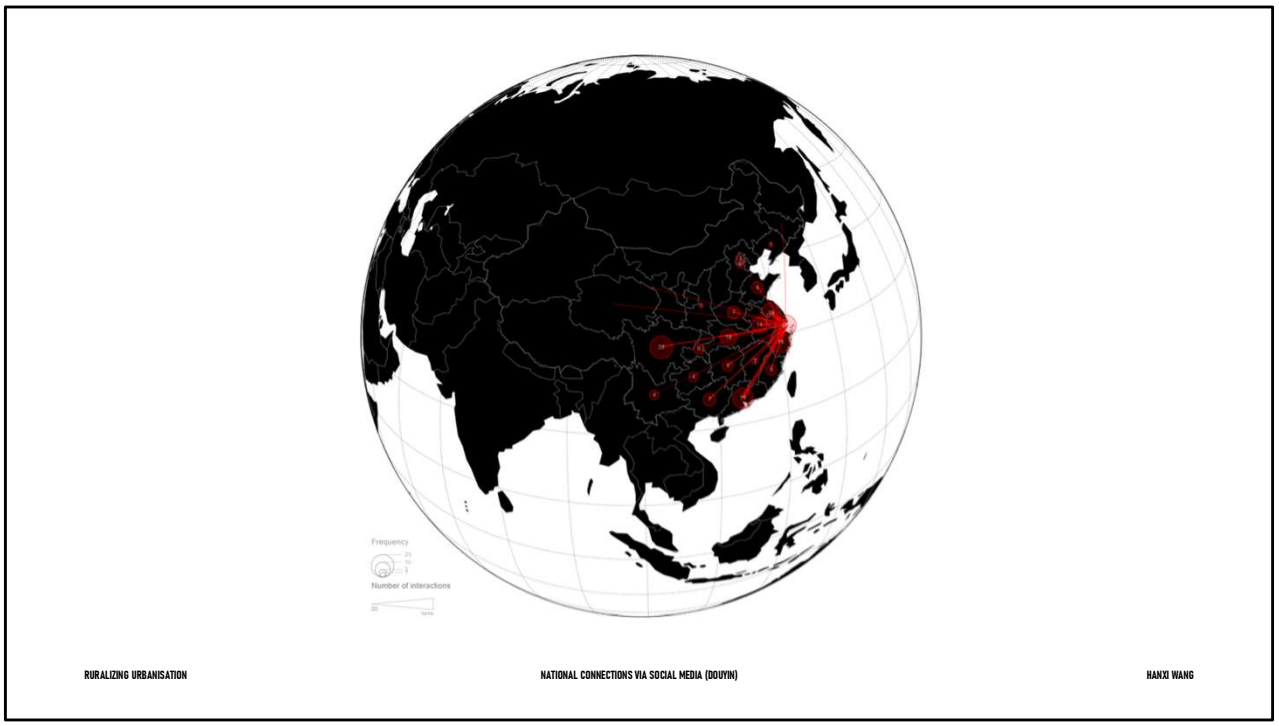
IRRUPTIONS ALONG URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE
ELECTRICAL AND COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

HANXI WANG

And the electrical grid infrastructure.



Remote sensing analysis shows that this propagation of adapted agrarian practices across the two cities shows ongoing, lively constellations of urbanized spaces that are undergoing spatial, physical, ecological transformations into agrarian landscapes.



And the tallying of news reports, government reports, and social media posts on kaihuang activities suggests that it could potentially be a nation-wide phenomenon.

As Monika Krause put it, ruralization is an “approach [… that] allows us to study new developments that only become visible once we abandon the narrow focus on urbanization”

The occurrence of kaihuang as an agrarian and “ruralizing” process within the cities this paper has studied is not a reversal of urbanization, rather I think that it should be studied as a new layer of transformation on top of urbanization, and a continuation of historical layers which has been buried too quickly and too violently within contemporary urbanization processes. Kaihuang constitute moments where the deeper rurality of the city that exists through the migration of individuals and the historical layers of knowledge, ideas, and aspirations begin to act again. The fact that such practices not only survive, but propagate without active incentive (even with active suppression) in the inhospitable urban soils demonstrates the resilience and hidden vitality of the agrarian within the city and urbanization. I think this poses important questions for our understanding of the world after urbanization