

Infrastructural Anxieties:

Fengshui Meets China's Toilet Revolution

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In the mountain village of Xuhao¹, Shanxi, North China, the state-led 'Toilet Revolution' (厕所革命) campaign has unleashed a complex dynamic of infrastructural desires and anxieties as it collides with the everyday rhythms and ontological moorings of rural life. Launched in 2015 by President Xi Jinping, this ambitious initiative aims to transform the humble latrine in rural China into a showpiece of "hygienic modernity" (Rogaski 2004) – a symbol of the nation's rural revival and a projection of the state's own preoccupations around infrastructural development. Coordinated by multiple ministries, including Agriculture and Rural Affairs, National Health Commission and Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the campaign is implemented locally by county and township governments in collaboration with village committees. Private contractors, hired by local government, typically carry out the construction work.

¹ The author uses pseudonyms for the village, its administrative county, and all interlocutors to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

In my fieldwork between 2021 and 2024, toilets as infrastructure underscore the ways in which state projects intertwine with domestic experiences. For Xuhao's villagers, the gleaming porcelain fixtures and impermeable septic tanks promise a new era of convenience and cleanliness. Yet even as some eagerly embrace these aspirational technologies, others meet them with unease, worrying about the cosmological, ecological and social disruptions they may bring. These infrastructural anxieties, in turn, generate new forms of resilience and creativity.

At the heart of these anxieties lies the troubled interface between the spatial logics of modern sanitation and the geomantic principles of *fengshui* (风水, literally 'wind-water'²) that have long governed the alignment of Xuhao homes. For generations, villagers have carefully oriented their dwellings to harness the flow of vital energies or *qi* (气), seeking to ensure the health and prosperity of their families (Bray 1997; Stafford 2000). This cosmology is not only spiritual but also utilitarian. In this worldview, toilets are relegated to low and distant corners of the courtyard, separate from the raised halls and cooking fires which are usually located towards the northern end of a dwelling (Knapp 1992). Moreover, the journey of waste is tightly braided into the agricultural cycle, as night soil is gathered to fertilize the corn and vegetable crops that sustain the village.

² Chinese geomantic art of spatial arrangement to harmonize with natural energies.



But as the Toilet Revolution sweeps through Xuhao, it upends these long-settled configurations of space and substance. The campaign's signature septic tanks, hailed as a hygienic seal against contamination (Santos 2021), sever the arterial link between latrine and land, interrupting the metabolic pulse of the village. Moreover, this modernizing movement is not solely state-led but also actively practised by villagers who build indoor toilets using the pans distributed by the state. Villagers themselves pursue a more modern, or *shixin* (时新, literally 'timely-new') lifestyle through these infrastructural transformations.

Panorama of Shou's courtyard house under fengshui influence.

Photos: Yuan Zhang, 2022.

Yet this pursuit of modernity does not come without anxiety. The newly refurbished commodes encroach on the main inner room of the home, their very presence threatening to disrupt the delicate balance of high and low in the fengshui cosmology. For people raised on such principles, these shiny fixtures portend not progress but possible cosmological disorder. However, most villagers I met admit that the precise nature of this metaphysical disturbance is difficult to articulate clearly. Their unease is more intuitive than explicable, a vague feeling that the spatial and spiritual order of their homes has been unsettled. This suggests that the fengshui-related anxieties surrounding the intrusion of the toilet are not necessarily rooted in a coherent system of beliefs but rather emerge from a more diffuse sense of ontological discomfort.

Such concerns suffuse the story of Shou, a 91-year-old villager whose sons recently installed a ceramic toilet in her side room. Though the gleaming toilet eases the bodily burdens of age, Shou worries about its possibly inauspicious location. She pointedly refers to it as a ‘chamber pot’ (尿盆), a mobile receptacle rather than a fixture, to assuage her cosmological concerns while still benefiting from its convenience. To mitigate the potential metaphysical disturbance, Shou labours to contain the new facility’s polluting potential, scrubbing the toilet daily and hanging an embroidered curtain in front of it as a symbolic shield.



Shou's new toilet in her side room.

Photos: Yuan Zhang, 2022.

Shou's toilet tale epitomizes the way in which older Xuhao villagers seek to reconcile the practical demands of aging bodies with the cosmological imperatives of fengshui. Her makeshift bathroom is not a seamless sanctuary of modern convenience but a space of semiotic tension and material compromise, a patchwork of new and old stitched together through everyday acts of cleaning, covering and reinterpreting. In this way, Shou's side room becomes a microcosm of the wider village, a site where the Toilet Revolution's abstract ideals of hygiene and comfort must be laboriously adapted to the concrete concerns of cosmology and custom.

Embroidered curtain in front of the toilet.

Photos: Yuan Zhang, 2022.



The concerns swirling around Xuhao's toilets are not just cosmological but also diversely contextualized. Age emerges as a significant factor, with older residents (60+) generally expressing more anxiety that the Toilet Revolution's standardized facilities will sever their vital connection to the land and its cycles, uprooting them from the agricultural and fengshui rhythms that have long sustained them. Yet, simultaneously, they are attracted to the pursuit of convenience and care for younger generations. Middle-aged villagers (40–60) often display a mix of pragmatism and tradition, while younger residents (under 40) are more likely to embrace the changes without significant cosmological worry.

Another primary concern among villagers is that although the state aims for hygienic modernity, it is often families who must bear the costs of maintaining their own private toilets. Wealthier households have more resources to implement creative solutions

to perceived fengshui issues, with some incorporating specific architectural elements such as decorative towers to restore spatial hierarchies. However, these households are also more likely to have already modernized their homes, reducing the impact of the state-led campaign.

In Xuhao, rather than simply obstructing the Toilet Revolution, these anxieties play an active role in shaping its uneven unfolding. Faced with cosmological and practical unease, villagers adapt and improvise, forging hybrid solutions that interweave old and new. Some splice unauthorized pipes to siphon waste into fields, circumventing the sealed septic tanks. Others adorn new bathrooms with geomantic objects to deflect inauspicious energies. Yet others opt out entirely, quietly maintaining their old latrines. Across these diverse tactics, villagers mobilize the productive potential of anxiety to refigure the campaign's designs into the fabric of rural life, asserting their own agency in various ways. This challenges framings of anxiety as a purely negative or debilitating force, revealing instead its role as a vital affective current that animates the continual remaking of Xuhao's material and social worlds.

Crucially, Xuhao's anxieties around toilets and fengshui are deeply intertwined with larger issues of village sustainability, intergenerational care and shifting cultural norms. The collision of the hygienic and the cosmological is not a localized clash, but one that echoes the wider dilemmas of rapid transformations in rural China. As the Toilet Revolution remakes sanitary infrastructures, it also reshapes kinship bonds, ritual practices and ecological flows, catalyzing new assemblages that meld the micro-politics of waste with the macro-politics of modernity. Far from a seamless grid of modern sanitation, the campaign's infrastructure emerges as a fragmentary, porous and piecemeal patchwork. In this sense, the anxieties that pervade Xuhao's toilets are not merely reactive symptoms of a tradition-bound peasantry but productive forces that shape the very form and meaning of modern sanitation in rural China.

In the flickering interplay of celestial towers and earthly commodes, we glimpse the uneven weft of China's rural revival, where the ancient art of geomantic arrangement meets the temporal anxieties of infrastructural change. Even as the Toilet Revolution heralds a new era of hygienic rationality, it has unleashed a torrent of cosmological creativity in Xuhao, as villagers strive to align the alien hardware of the state with traditions, spirituality and everyday hygiene. The infrastructure of toilets thus serves as a field of contact zones and sites of negotiation between the material and the symbolic, the hygienic and the cosmic, the old and the 'timely-new'.

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