

By Ye Jun

In the New Eastern district of Zhengzhou, Henan Province, everything looks shiny: gleaming skyscrapers, six-lane roads, modern shopping malls, a 2 kilometer promenade and a museum exhibiting impressive artistic taste. As you are struck by what's in front of your eyes, it hits you that there is something missing in this metropolitan spectacle: there are no people.

Journalist Michiel Hulshof and architect Daan Roggeveen regularly came across such cityscapes during their two years investigating the urban and social development of the emerging mega-cities of central and western China – one of the world's fastest urbanizing regions.

Returning to their homes in Shanghai from China's hinterland, Hulshof and Roggeveen noted that the development of these cities mirrored the development of Shanghai. As they look back on their time spent in 15 rapidly developing cities, the two 34-year-olds concluded that many of the major inland cities have followed Shanghai's top-down development model, which in a way is something that they have had to overcome. At the same time, the experience has provided them with new perspectives on the development of east coast metropolises like Shanghai.

"Coinciding with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's recent remark on China's future development, one of our most important conclusions is that after a big focus on physical development, Chinese cities should pay more attention to soft items, such as education and intelligent development of the city," Roggeveen told the Global Times.

The pair is now finishing a book entitled *Go West – Emerging Mega-cities in the Heart of China*, which is scheduled to be published in September of this year.

Looking westward

"The pace at which China is urbanizing has naturally attracted considerable interest from all professionals working on urban issues," Daniel Hoornweg, lead urban specialist of the Urban Development Unit of the World Bank, told the Global Times.

Hulshof and Roggeveen are two coming with a tide of foreigners interested in the development of China's mega-cities. "It's the only place in the world where really big cities are being constructed at the moment," Roggeveen said. "So for architects, it's obviously an interesting



(From top) **Construction sites in Chongqing. A completed apartment complex in Zhengzhou without residents. A picture taken in Chengdu, where Michiel Hulshof and Daan Roggeveen investigated the city's cultural life.**

place to go."

For his part, Hulshof felt that the foreign press had written a lot about China, but mainly about what was happening on the east coast. So when the pair met by chance two years ago in Shanghai, they hit it off right away and decided to explore urbanism and social change in what they called the big "developopolises" in central and western China.

In February 2009, they took a train to Zhengzhou. "When we arrived, we saw things that we were not used to in Shanghai, and that was the moment we thought now we have to understand and analyze what we see," Roggeveen said.

They picked 15 cities, mostly provincial capitals, that they thought had the potential to become world cities. These cities featured large populations, fast economic growth, were well-connected to the outside world and geographically centered. Over the next two years, they talked to farmers who had their

homes demolished and moved into high-rise apartment blocks; looked into the lives of construction workers reshaping the city; and met architects who complained that the cities were growing faster than they could draw them. The scale and speed of urbanization they witnessed was unprecedented. One developer in Wuhan told them: "Manhattan was built in 100 years; La Defense in 50 years; we will finish in 10."

Empty cities

Citing apartment complexes without residents, museums without artists, and international airports without international flights as some of their more bizarre discoveries, Hulshof and Roggeveen recognized that this phenomenon is not all that unfamiliar. "They are comparable to the empty towns in Shanghai, like Thames Town in Songjiang district, which is a result of speculation and can be dangerous to China's – and even the global – economy," Roggeveen said.

After two years of research, they concluded that these cities are copying the "Shanghai" model: first adopting physical appearance of a world city, including large-scale infrastructure construction, as part of an extremely top-down style of development.

"This is a very different way of developing a city compared with countries like Brazil or India, where people move into cities first before cities start to develop. And the Chinese way of development is very controlled and organized, either because of the influence of the government or big State-owned companies," Hulshof said. "Like in the case of Pudong: the skyline can compete with any other in the world, and a lot of the skyscrapers are built by the government and remain empty for a long time."

Although many of the mega-cities in central and western China are following the development path of metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, the problem is that they do not have the cache to draw residents like those two cities. "Beijing held the 2008 Olympic Games and Shanghai held the 2010 World Expo, which have served to attract global artists, academics and

specialists in every field," Roggeveen told the Global Times.

Attracting people

Roggeveen and Hulshof believe that cities in western China can overcome the challenge of filling in their buildings with people by focusing less on infrastructure development and more on improving education and cultivating culture, which the pair calls "soft" methods. "Many of those inland cities have developed more self-esteem and unique identities," Roggeveen said. "Like Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, it is very much focusing on distinguishing itself from other cities based on its local ethnic culture."

As the inland cities develop, they are taking advantage of their own circumstances to grow increasingly competitive. "For example, a new Foxconn factory recently opened in Zhengzhou, so people from Henan don't need to move to Shenzhen anymore; they can just move from the countryside to Zhengzhou, work in the factory and go home every weekend instead of once a year," Roggeveen said.

Roggeveen and Hulshof believe that the cities in eastern China have something to learn from their western counterparts in this respect. In the case of Shanghai, the image and identity of the city is as a financial hub for Asia, they said, adding that Shanghai should put more emphasis on opening itself to the outside world in a way that it allows and stimulates small- and medium-sized businesses as well as a vibrant cultural scene.

Shanghai can still maintain its attraction and competitive edge on matters of location and quality of life. "Shanghai still has some of the best universities in China, and it's very important to make sure that the quality of these institutes keeps on improving – to make Shanghai's employees better, instead of cheaper than other cities," Roggeveen said. "Shanghai should also make use of its location as a harbor – thus better connected to the outside world – and work on providing cleaner air, reducing traffic jams, and so on." "We had a funny thought the other day that maybe after China has developed cities by creating Special Economic Zones (SEZ), like Shenzhen, in the future there will be SAZ – Special Academic and Art Zones – where there's more liberty in critical art and academics," Hulshof said.

► Dutch authors find that inland mega-cities need to bolster education, cultivate culture

East or west, soft is best

(From left to right) **Journalist Michiel Hulshof and architect Daan Roggeveen and their research assistant Song Xinlin.** Photos: Courtesy of Daan Roggeveen

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