

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: **The Hong Kong Polytechnic University** |

Unit of Assessment (UoA): **28 Social Work and Social Policy** |

Title of case study: **Searching for an Alternative Development Model in Rural China: A 19-year Action Research Project in Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangdong** |

(1) Summary of the impact

Given the challenges faced by rural communities in China, our interdisciplinary action research team decided to identify specific rural problems and create a practice model for social development. We developed the “rural–urban alliance” model, which has been applied in villages in Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guangdong. Since 2013, the model has empowered local communities and improved the livelihood of marginal groups. Twenty co-operatives were established that effectively doubled villagers’ household annual income. Two thousand social work placements and 407 social work stations were generated as a result of the model’s success. The research undertaken for this project also stimulated public debate and led to policy changes by generating awareness of the complexity of agricultural development in China. |

(2) Underpinning research

The “rural–urban alliance” model was developed over the period from 2001 to 2019 and is based on action research projects led by Dr. Hok Bun KU of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, who partnered with colleagues at various local universities in Mainland China (Yunnan University, Sun Yat-sen University, Sichuan Agricultural Universities, and Peking University). Funded by an RGC Competitive Bids Grant, the first action research project was undertaken in 2002 in the mountain villages of Guizhou Miao and Yunnan Zhuang that are home to ethnic minorities. The underpinning research revealed that the mainstream economic development model was unable to address the unsustainable agricultural development and food security crises in rural China [R2, R5]. The research team explored alternative models and practices to reduce the adverse consequences of social transformation in these regions and improve the lives of these marginal groups [R1, R3].

Our research in Guizhou and Yunnan led to five key findings: 1) industrialized agriculture is not sustainable: it causes land pollution, compromises food safety, and leads to the loss of traditional farming skill; 2) local assets and resources can be used for rural development; 3) a practical way to tackle the unsustainability of rural development and problems with food security is to encourage villagers to return to organic farming, and to use local materials and indigenous craftsmanship to produce works that can be sold in urban markets; 4) an urban consumer network is critical to rural development; and 5) social workers play an important role in organizing rural production co-operatives and urban consumer networks and bridging the gap between rural producers and urban consumers.

Based on these findings, we developed the rural–urban alliance practice model in 2007. This model not only helps local communities to generate income but also renews pride and identity. It leads to stronger community participation in the preservation of local culture and greater resistance to the erosion of traditional community life occasioned by global socio-economic forces. After a five-year trial, we found that the model successfully met the goals of building the capacity and improving the financial situation of the village inhabitants [R1, R3].

Another action research project was conducted in a rural community affected by the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. The situation of rural Sichuan was similar to that of Guizhou and Yunnan, so we

applied the rural–urban alliance model to facilitate post-disaster community development. The research team received a GRF grant and donation from various foundations to support its work in rural Sichuan from 2010 to 2018. Our experience in rural Sichuan confirmed that the rural–urban alliance model makes a positive difference in the social and economic well-being of families in disaster-affected rural communities [R5, R6].

In collaboration with Prof. Zhang Heqing from Sun Yat-sen University and with funding from the Guangdong provincial government, the research team is currently undertaking an action research project in villages of Conghua to evaluate the effectiveness of the rural–urban alliance model (2010–2020). The problems associated with rural development in Guangdong are typical of other parts of rural China. The rural–urban alliance model encourages social entrepreneurship through organizing production and developing urban markets for local products. It has offered an alternative path to rural development in Guangdong. This action research project influenced social work service delivery in China, especially Guangdong. The model was adopted by the Guangdong provincial government and became the framework for the establishment of the “Double Hundreds Plan” (雙百計畫) of social work development in rural Guangdong.

In summary, our underpinning research identified the problem of unsustainable development in rural China, and our action research projects have shown that alternative methods are effective in empowering local communities and improving the livelihood of marginal groups in Mainland China. The model we created has also had a positive impact on social work service delivery and government policies in Mainland China.

These projects targeting rural development in Mainland China are the result of the joint efforts of colleagues from PolyU and local universities in Mainland China. The members of the research team from the Department of Applied Social Sciences of PolyU include Hok Bun KU (Associate Professor), Hairong YAN (Associate Professor), Anita KOO (Associate Professor), Sik Chung YEUNG (teaching fellow), Karita KAN (Assistant Professor), and Ngai PUN (Professor, from 2008-2017). |

(3) References to the research

[R1] Ku, Hok Bun (2011). “‘Happiness Being Like a Blooming Flower’: An Action Research of Rural Social Work in an Ethnic Minority Community of Yunnan Province, PRC,” *Action Research Journal*, 9 (4): 344–369.

[R2] Yan, Hairong and Chen Yiyuan (2015). "Agrarian Capitalization Without Capitalism? Capitalist Dynamics From Above and Below in China." *Journal of Agrarian Change* 15(3): 366–91.

[R3] Pun, Ngai, Ku, Hok Bun, Yan, Hairong, & Koo, Anita (2015). *Social Economy in China and the World*. London: Routledge.

[R4] Ku, Hok Bun, & Ma, Yuna (2015). “‘Rural-Urban Alliance’ as a New Model for Post-Disaster Social Work Intervention in Community Reconstruction – The case in Sichuan, China,” *International Social Work*. Vol. 58(5) 743–758.

[R5] Yan, Hairong, Chen Y., & Ku, Hok Bun (2016). “China’s Soybean Crisis: The Logic of Modernization and Its Discontents,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 43.2: 373–395.

[R6] Ku, Hok Bun, & Dominelli, Lena (2018). “Not only Eating Together: Space and Green Social Work Intervention in Hazard Affected Area in Ya’an, Sichuan of China,” *The British Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 48, pp.1409–1431. |

(4) Details of the impact

Empowering Local People and Communities

The most gratifying achievements of our project have been the establishment of a core group of committed and motivated villagers who are keen to develop the project, the increased sense of solidarity and social cohesion in the community, and the growth of confidence and pride. Through this highly participative and empowering process, many villagers have regained their sense of control over their own destiny and have developed a much stronger sense of identification with their cultural heritage [S1, S2].

Since 2013, the villagers in the project sites have been active agents of development. Twenty rural co-operatives have been established for long-term community development and improvement in the villagers' income, living environment, and community life. The higher prices fetched by organic products have enabled villagers to improve their economic conditions through the urban-rural network. The Yunnan project in Pingzhai, for example, led to an increase in the average annual income among co-operative members from 3927 RMB before joining in 2014 to 8478 RMB in 2017. Almost all villagers saw their annual household income doubled after joining the co-operative [S3].

The community life in our project sites also improved. In Sichuan, the social work station and village groups have organized community activities for the whole village to celebrate traditional Chinese festivals and provide services for the elderly. On 15 September 2016 – the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival – around a hundred villagers of Miaoxia in Ya'an Sichuan organized an event they called “Our X Village, Our Mid-Autumn Festival Feast.” They mobilized the whole village to celebrate the festival. Every household contributed a dish for dinner. Those over 80 years old were exempted from this requirement and were invited to enjoy the meal and share in the celebrations [S3]. Such activities demonstrate the fact that the research project has generated a sense of the importance of cultural values and the need to help marginalized groups such as the elderly.

Impact on Social Work Service Delivery in Rural China

As a result of the success of the rural-urban alliance model, and in close collaboration with our long-term partner Prof. Zhang Heqing (張和清) from the Sun Yat-sen University, we established the Guangdong Lvgeng Social Work Development Center [S3]. In all the rural areas where we introduced our project, including Guangdong, Sichuan, and Hunan, the model received appreciative recognition from the government [S4]. Mr. Gong Pu-guang, Vice Minister of Civil Affairs, visited our project in Guangdong in 2014 and gave it high praise [S5].

The model was adopted by the Guangdong provincial government and became the framework for the establishment of 407 rural social work stations in Guangdong and the creation of 2,000 rural social worker positions in from 2017 to 2021 [S6, S7]. From 2013-2019, we also conducted 35 training workshops with 1,200 social workers from various provinces of China. The significance and impact of our training program were highly appreciated by the trainees [S3].

Influence on Policy-Making

Our research in rural China exposed problems arising from agricultural development, especially the area of food security [S8]. In addition to implementing alternative means of rural development, we have advocated for policy changes since 2014. We submitted policy proposals to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC 全国政协) in 2014, 2015, and 2017, in which we drew attention to the need to “protect China's traditional agriculture,” “set up a breeding preservation area and protect China's germplasm resources,” and “support collective land ownership.”

The CPPCC, which encourages scholars to make policy recommendations, is an important channel to the government. All of our proposals were submitted by the CPPCC representative Prof. Wang Hui

(汪暉) [S9]. Some of these proposals have had a significant impact on high levels of policy. For instance, our proposal to “set up a breeding preservation area and protect China’s germplasm resources (建立農民育種保護區、保護中國種質資源),” submitted in 2015, has strongly influenced agricultural policy. On November 4, 2015, the Ministry of Agriculture of the PRC announced a revision of the seed law (種子法) [S9, S10]. In the revised law, protecting germplasm resources was clearly indicated in Chapter 2: Articles 8-10 [S10, Chapter 2]. |

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

- [S1] Documentary video, Shining House (發亮的房子), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bKDT-OCT_c&t=110s, published on June 6, 2019.
- [S2] Documentary video, China Stories: Farmer (中國故事：插秧人), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6uG3T67CETQ&list=PL5etv6yg69qW62s0W9Wi_kvDR0EPB_Omn3&index=5&t=69s, RTHK 香港電台, published on Jan 18, 2019.
- [S3] Official website of Guangdong Lvgeng Social Work Development Center, <http://www.lvgeng.org/about/>.
- [S4] Documentary Video, “Chronicle of Guangdong Rural Revitalization, No. 29” (廣東乡村振兴紀事第29期), 29/12/2018, Guangdong Radio and Television (廣東廣播電視台), <https://v.qq.com/x/page/q08204r4sef.html>.
- [S5] Guangzhou Association of Social Workers. (2014). *Guangzhou Social Work*, 4 (11), 1–2.
- [S6] Supporting letter from Prof. Zhang Heqing (張和清) from Sun Yat-sen University.
- [S7] Official website of Guangdong Two Hundreds Social Work Project (廣東社工雙百計畫), <http://www.shuangbai-plan.org/about/5358/>.
- [S8] TV Interview, “Food Security Issues in China” (中國食品安全問題), 12/08/2016, Fairchild TV (新時代電視), Canada. http://fairchildtv.com/newsarchive_detail.php?n=28&topic=543&episode=1181.
- [S9] Supporting documents from Prof. Wang Hui (汪暉)’s interviews and papers: 1) “Traditional Agriculture Protection in the Context of Globalization” (全球化背景下的傳統農業保護”, 10th March, 2014, <http://history.sina.com.cn/his/zt/2014-03-10/154784849.shtml>; 2) “Highlighting Rural Reform in Deepening Economic Reform” (深化改革要突出農村改革), 6th March, 2015, http://www.cssn.cn/djch/djch_djchhg/llhvtebpbcdc/201503/t20150306_1536017.shtml; 3) Wang, Hui (2017) “Plan the third round of land contracting as soon as possible and increase the support of collective ownership of land” (盡早謀劃第三輪土地承包,加大土地集體所有權支持力度). *Economic Herald* (經濟導刊). No 4. pp. 36–37.
- [S10] Ministry of Agriculture of the People’s Republic of China (2015), “Seed Law revised on 4th November, 2015” (《種子法》2015年11月4日修訂), http://jiuban.moa.gov.cn/fwllm/zxbs/xzsk/spyj/201706/t20170606_5661982.htm. |