

Cultural Illiteracy and Professional Trap: Reflection on a Practice Research in Rural China

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Background

- In March of 2001, for helping our MSW (China) program to develop rural social work practicum site, the Department of Applied Social Sciences of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the Department of Social Work of the Yunan University, and the People's Government of a prefecture in Yunan Province, undertook a joint action research project titled "Searching for a Capacity Building Model for Rural Social Work in PRC".
- The purpose of launching the project was also to develop a rural social work development model which is congruent with the Chinese cultural context and which could generate useful insights for rural social work practice in China.



Objectives

- To understand the needs of the villagers in China;
- To strengthen and support the capacity of local communities to grow and develop;
- To collaborate with local universities to build up their strength in theories and practice in rural social work and rural social development;
- To identify the contents and methods of rural social work;



- To evaluate the effectiveness of the model for rural social work through on-going action research (experimentation)
- To develop a rural development model which is appropriate to the Chinese cultural context and which could generate useful insights for education and for rural development practice in China



Project Site

- The project site, Pingzhai village, located at the north-eastern region of Yunnan province, Southwest China. It has a history of around 300 years and is now an administrative village surrounded by eight natural villages. It is resided mostly by the Zhuang ethnic minority group. It is officially classified as a poor village since its people are not yet self-sustainable and are still struggling to have enough food and clothing



Research Methodology

- Inter-disciplinary approach
- Collaborative partnership with local scholars and practitioners
- Adopting participatory action research approach which attempts to break down the distinction between the researchers and the researched, the subjects and the objects of knowledge production by the participation of the people in the process of gaining and creating knowledge.
- In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action



Our Practices



Doing Needs Assessment via Oral Histories Collection



China Villages at the Crossroad of Development

- same as other Chinese villages, Pingzhai village is experiencing great transformation in the post-reform era
- the vulnerability of the rural poor not only in terms of poverty, but also cultural identity crisis
- connecting to the outside world and the disrespecting of traditional culture
- high technology of agriculture and the losing confidence in traditional life skills
- consumption revolution and the making of new poverty



Culture and Development

- making effort in discovering local capacities and developing these potentialities in order to promote individual and communal change
- promoting new form of collectivism and local participation
- enhancing local cultural identity and confidence



Building a community integrated social service center



Methane gas pond project



Education fund management committee for supporting children education



Forming village cultural recreation team



Alternative education



Village Histories Writing

- aiming at rediscovering of cultural roots through oral testimony
- enhancing community solidarity
- enhancing cultural identity and confidence



Reforming Funeral Practice (Reducing Filial piety cloth)

- Aiming at reducing women's burden
- Protecting good aspect of traditional culture and changing the negative aspect of the custom of the community



Economy and Development

- rediscovering the Unsustainability of Existing Rural Development Model
- changing unequal relationship of dependency in conventional poverty reduction programs
- resisting the exploitation from the middleman and corporations
- encouraging organic farming & green consumption
- improving villagers' living and condition of existence



- promoting mutual-aid network via building producer coop & consumer network
- raising consumer's consciousness of green consumption and fair trade
- Getting mutual benefit between the urban and rural and promoting urban-rural harmony
- increasing the income of the villagers via fair trade



Pingzhai Production Cooperative

- The project started in 2007 and in July 2009, the production cooperative was formally registered. In 2103, 32 households joined the coop. They are producing organic rice for the urban consumers.



Pingzhai Poultry Raising Cooperative



- The project started in 2007 and in July 2009 the production cooperative was formally registered. There is 13 household members and they are raising free range chicken (土鸡).



Women Handicraft Cooperative Group



In these 14 years, there are many things happened and many things can be shared...



The Dilemma Faced by Professional Social Workers in Rural Work

- Two stories
 - Meetings and Discussion
 - Oxfam's embroidery order



Social Work's Discussion on Culture

- Cultural competency
- Cultural sensitivity



Insight from Anthropology

- Cultural laden – professional trap
- Cultural illiteracy
- Power matters



Reflexivity in Social Work Practice

- Subject position of different actors
- Cultural laden/professional knowledge of social workers
- The comfort of existing power relationship



Thank you!