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Social development needs assessment in China: lessons from an international collaborative field school in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region

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We explore the potential for rural and urban community needs assessment research in China, particularly in response to increasing rural to urban internal migration. Models for migration and community development are presented. We identify various methods that can inform social development planning, intervention, and evaluation. A collaborative community development field school in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region was conducted with US and Chinese students and faculty. Plans for, and initial results of, a qualitative rural needs assessment are described. A semi-structured urban resident needs assessment survey and the results of a small pilot study are presented. Challenges of international collaboration and implications and suggestions are reviewed.

本文探索了在中国农村和城市社区进行需求评估研究的潜力，特别是在回应不断增加的城乡人口流动。作者描述了各种移民和社会发展模式，并确定了几项可用于社会发展规划、干预和评估的方法。作者在广西壮族自治区建立了一所由美国和中国的学生和教员合作的社会发展田野考察学校，并描述了计划的内容和初步结果。作者在文中描述了一个评估城市居民需求的半组织性调查和一个小型试验研究的结果，并探讨国际合作所面临的挑战、影响和建议。

Keywords: need assessment; asset-based community development; neighbourhood resident survey; observation; field research; migrants; urbanization

Even with rapid development, the 'Chinese Economic Miracle' has not benefited all areas and segments of the country equally and not come without serious economic, environmental, social, and political challenges, including the mass migration of large populations of workers (Chen 1998, Li and Huang 2006, Mallee 2005, Xiang 2007). To more effectively assess, understand, and respond to these changing disparities, there is a great need for China to take full advantage of its immense and diverse population by developing methods to collect unbiased information and new, culturally and contextually sensitive ideas from residents at the most local community level. This can be achieved by training local researchers, students, and community leaders in several, relatively simple methods of assessing community needs and assets (Neuber 1980).

To attain the goal of locally informed and socially sensitive and invested planned development, Chinese authorities could benefit from allowing research at the local level to understand how to address problems at the local level. Even as major policy making will remain centralized, local information gathering can help authorities understand context-specific needs and make intelligent social development decisions. Therefore, students, local officials, and citizen-leaders can benefit social development efforts by being trained in empirical needs- assessment methods. This article will briefly describe a few such methods

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and our experience in trying to implement two of them collaboratively with local Chinese university students and faculty during an international field school project based in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region (hereafter 'Guangxi').

We would like to make it clear that this article is intended to serve as a summary of an exploratory collaborative action research endeavour. Much of this article is in the form of a field report, but we believe our initial observations might stimulate dialogue about several issues that scholars and practitioners in the field of social development in China might find intriguing, such as the limitations of and barriers to international collaborative action research; the sensitivity and localized control of some provincial Chinese bureaucrats over social development projects; and finally the practicality and usefulness of local and context specific needs assessments. Furthermore, based on our limited experience in Guangxi, our suggestions should be taken as that, not as prescriptions for direct action based on overwhelming evidence. Our experience in the United States is that needs assessments are invaluable steps to social development, and based on our initial study of social life during our field school in China, we consider that needs assessments might be of benefit to Chinese social development practitioners as well.

Rural and urban social change in China

The percentage of the Chinese rural population dropped from 82.1% to 59.5% between 1978 and 2003 (Zhan 2005). The country continues to urbanize and it is predicted that half of the population will live in urban areas by 2010 (Chan 1994, Sun 2006). Clearly, internal migration is one of the most important driving forces of social change in modern-day China and understanding it and its impact can offer clues about potential areas for social development. There is a host of issues created by human migration at the macro, meso, and micro-levels. Migration patterns have created social changes and tensions in China based on space (rural vs. urban), generation (young vs. old), and increasingly class (concentration of wealth among some) (Xiang 2007).

The recent explosion of rural to urban migration makes needs assessment an essential tool for social development planning in order to address changes and tensions created by internal migration. There is a combination of push/pull factors which stimulate migration flows, and Figure 1 depicts these factors in the Chinese context. Increased poverty in the countryside coupled with increased economic opportunities in urban areas are certainly two important push and pull factors respectively, but one could look at other push/pull factors as a guide for needs assessments. For example, if dissatisfaction with life in rural areas is a push factor, then one potential area for social development could be creating social opportunities in rural areas, but a needs assessment would be required to determine the details and saliency of what is lacking and desired. Likewise, pull factors may be a potential area for social development. If urban social institutions draw people into urban communities, how can these institutions be better developed to meet rising needs? The two major macro-structural changes which have had a dramatic impact on creating these migration flows, decollectivization and hukou deregulation, are briefly reviewed below.

Decollectivization of land and property in the countryside started in 1978 and was finalized in 1984. Two types of villages emerged as a result of decollectivization: subsistence-oriented and market-oriented (Luong and Unger 1998). Market-oriented villages are those which have access to towns and markets, can yield agricultural surpluses and thus work to develop their rural economy. The other type of village is known as

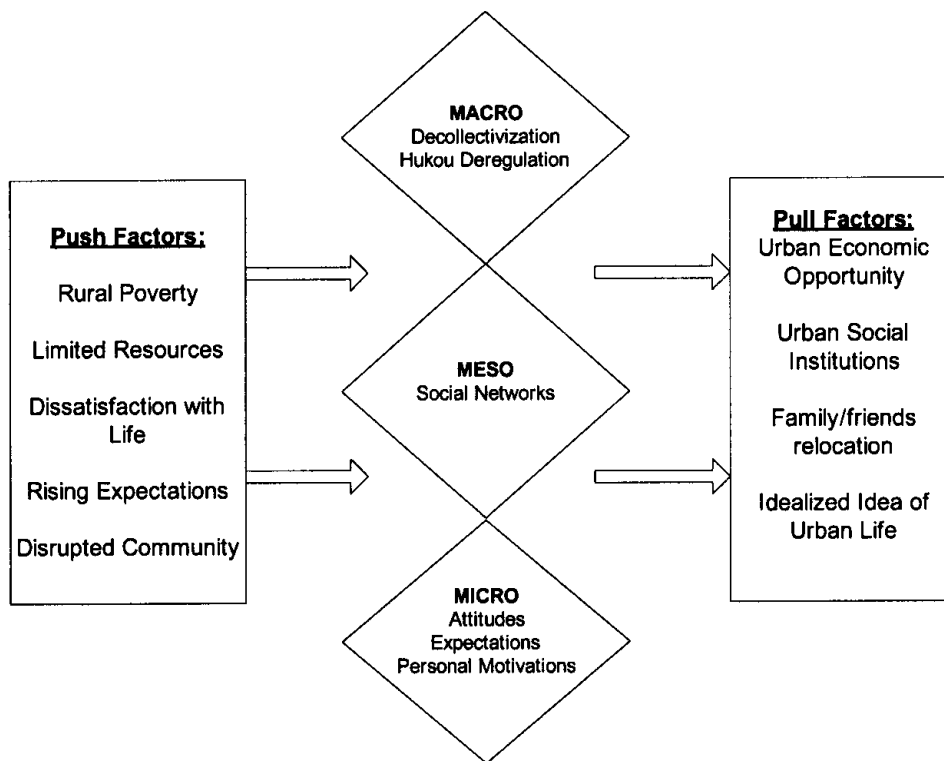


Figure 1. Model of push/pull factors for migration in the Chinese context

subsistence-oriented because it is so far removed from markets, while little surplus farm products are yielded because of limits to agricultural production such as poor soil and/or little capital to produce surplus. This type of village is able only to survive, not develop. What has exacerbated inequalities in subsistence-oriented villages is the fixed tax local authorities placed on farmers. Wealthier families have not had to pay more (Li 2004). Furthermore, farm net income has been decreasing since this transition. Subsequently, non-farm income is increasing which leads to rising rural income disparities (Chen 2006).

China's increasing liberalization and reform also led to the deregulation of the hukou system. The hukou is a registration system that determines where family members can find employment, enroll in school and gain access to social services (Liang 2001). Between the 1960s and 1980s, hukou was strictly regulated and there was a relatively low level of rural-urban migration. By the 1980s, the system became increasingly deregulated which led to a demonstrable increase in rural-urban migration flows (Mallee 2005). It was a combination of decollectivization and hukou relaxation which stimulated migration flows in China. Exacerbated economic conditions for a significant amount of the rural population served as a push factor for rural out-migration while urban economic opportunities and relaxation of the hukou served as pull factors for urban in-migration. In 2003, it was estimated that there were 114 million rural labor migrants in China (Zhan 2005).

Despite generally clear economic benefits of urban growth in China (Au and Henderson 2006), the rapidity of urbanization and inadequate planning has resulted in

serious problems, not only for the rural areas departed (see above) but for the new and expanding cities trying to keep up with explosive development. Furthermore, residents of smaller cities, such as those in Guangxi, have not experienced the same income benefits as those in larger cities, according to Au and Henderson.

Due to past central state policies favoring production investment over housing investment and the sharp increase in urban migration described above, there are serious urban housing shortages in China (Chen 1998, Chen and Gao 1993), despite recent development booms in many areas. Urban sprawl has become a problem even as the hukou system separating urban and rural families persists, although not as strictly enforced, and massive urban migration has produced a widening gap between the two classes of legal and migrant urban residents (Li and Huang 2006). Despite ongoing housing reforms and a massive increase in housing construction, these two classes of citizens are being housed in increasingly unequal gentrified versus deteriorating workers' neighbourhoods (Li and Wu 2006).

There is recent evidence that overall residential satisfaction in China is low and that many people want to move but feel trapped (Fang 2006), especially urban migrants and other disempowered residents who live in public housing and are not part of the new entrepreneurial class (Wu 2006). Thus, studies of residential neighbourhood satisfaction and needs assessment, including housing and other issues, is vital to both the welfare of residents and to the stability of society. Physical environmental issues can be a very effective, and relatively safe, focus around which to engage and mobilize citizens for cooperative community improvement (Jones and Xu 2002, Perkins *et al.* 1996, Perkins *et al.* 1990).

The role of community needs and assets assessment in social development

Systematic problem identification and needs assessment is the first, critical step to any applied research or informed development process, whether the context is human capital development, corporate, public, or nongovernmental organization development, or urban or rural community development. Figure 2 presents an ecological framework for community development based on examples (Perkins *et al.* 2004). A similar framework could be adapted for the Chinese context, identifying larger-scale centralized policies as well as a local community role for development in each of four environmental domains: economic, political, socio-cultural, and physical infrastructure/environmental protection. At both levels and across all four environmental domains, without an empirical evaluation of local needs including significant voice and involvement of the actual residents or workers affected, social planning and policies risk identifying and assessing the wrong parameters, misunderstanding what they do assess, and are almost guaranteed to lack 'buy-in' and cooperation from local stakeholders.

Public health/social epidemiology, action research, community experimentation, and asset-based community development are four different approaches to data-based development planning. They have been tested for decades, successfully adapted to countless different community and organizational contexts, and each starts with an objective participatory assessment of local problems, needs, and/or assets.

Epidemiology is most often conducted by government centres for disease control and local public health offices. Social epidemiology extends this approach to the study of the frequency and causes of various social problems. In both cases, a key goal is to measure

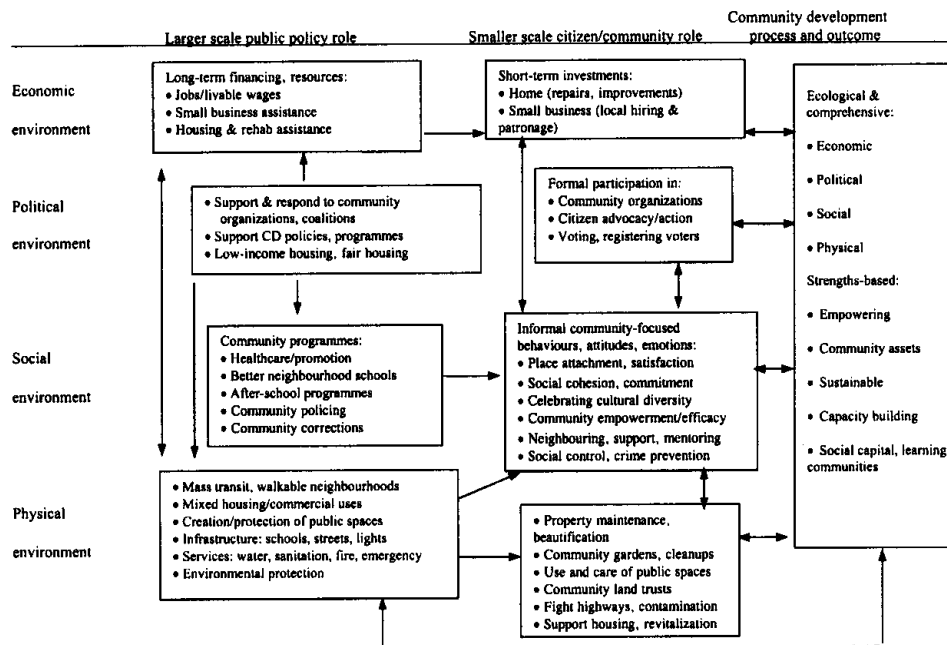


Figure 2. An ecological framework for community development (Perkins *et al.* 2004)

location and rates of incidence (new cases) and prevalence (existing cases) and to identify specific risk factors for developing problems as well as health promotion factors, with the goal of assessing local health or social needs for prevention and intervention planning (Rhodes and Jason 1991). This approach can be particularly useful in areas where there is concern over environmental health hazards or other problems that may have uneven geographic or demographic dispersion.

Action research generally consists of the following steps: (1) problem identification and definition, (2) needs assessment and other fact finding, (3) goal setting, (4) action (a programme or policy change), and (5) evaluation (Argyris *et al.* 1985, Lewin 1946). The cycle then begins again. A similar, but more elaborated process, again starting with participatory needs assessment, is the currently popular applied social research technology labeled '*empowerment evaluation*' (Fetterman and Wandersman 2005).

'Experimental social innovation' or '*community experimentation*' (Fairweather and Davidson 1986) is an approach to helping communities using quasi-experimental designs, which have the advantage of greater confidence that any measured outcomes are due to whatever interventions are carried out. It starts with (1) definition of a significant social problem, and (2) naturalistic field observations to assess the problem, and also involves (3) generating innovative subsystem-level solutions, (4) comparison of different subsystems in solving the problem, (5) evaluating the innovated subsystems in their natural context, and (6) evaluation (both process and impact) and dissemination (both practical and scientific).

In reaction to exclusive problem or needs-oriented community assessments, which can be used to simply justify professional social services that are not always cost-efficient or

effective at all, *Asset-based Community Development* (ABCD) is an approach that identifies and maps existing community elements that are often seen as problems and turns them into assets (Kretzman and McKnight 1993). This approach is reflected in the strengths-based approach to development represented in Figure 2. For example, most people have hidden capacities that merely require identification, opportunity, and development. Youth, seniors, people with disabilities, and the unemployed are often seen as drags on public and charitable resources, but those very groups have time, energy, experience, skills and other strengths that can be put to great use. Other community assets include local faith organizations and other voluntary associations, cultural (arts, music, ethnic) organizations, and such local institutions as parks, libraries, schools, community colleges, police, and hospitals. If banks are not serving the community well, alternative credit institutions can be established. Physical assets include abandoned and other 'problem' spaces, such as vacant lots or underused or dangerous public spaces and buildings, which simply need to be cleaned up, protected, and put to better uses.

Needs assessment methods. All four of the above approaches to community needs assessment (as well as programme evaluation) can be validly, objectively, and usefully conducted by government agencies, by university-based researchers and students, or by local community organizations and residents with just a little training and assistance. Although a detailing of all possible needs assessment methods, and how to conduct them, is beyond our present scope, they include community surveys, in-depth key informant interviews, focus groups and community forums, systematic naturalistic and participant observation of community environments, analysis of existing data (local Census, health, education, crime statistics, etc.), and use of local newspapers, newsletters, and organizational records (Homan 2004, Neuber 1980, Perkins and Taylor 1996). Below we describe some of the methods we used, or tried to use, to assess urban and rural community needs in Guangxi. But first we present the field school model for student training in community development research and how it can be an effective programme for international, student-led, collaborative action research projects. It could also be adapted for use by Chinese students and practitioners for conducting their own field school with or without international collaboration. For example, this could facilitate localized, context-specific, practical development research, such as assessments of the special needs of ethnic minority communities.

Overview of the field school¹

The Department of Human and Organizational Development and Center for Community Studies at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA, have established an International Field School in Intercultural Education and Research which not only trains future community development professionals and scholars in collaborative cross-cultural community studies, but provides benefits to the host community and its educational partners. The collaboration involves faculty, graduate and undergraduate students from both and host country universities as well as local development, health, education or other agencies in need of research or technical assistance.

Social development interventions, projects and programmes at the micro-, meso- and macro-system levels are designed and implemented through narrowly-defined sectors, such

as educational institutions' transmission of skills and knowledge; family socialization into values, norms, and aspirations; community organizations' capacity building and social action; civil society advocates of justice and rights and obligations; public health agencies' work on mental and physical well-being, welfare institutions' provision of social services; business firms' commercial activities, training, and skills; and governmental policy/action on natural and human resources, security, and sustainability.

The field school aids and enhances such interventions through needs assessment studies, such as we describe below, as well as process and outcome evaluations, participant observation, and other applied research. The ability to conceptualize, design and carry out both valid and useful studies of inter- and intra-sectorial policies, programmes and projects is an important skill for community development practitioners, managers, planners, and evaluators. Equally important is learning how such community studies are undertaken in the complex reality of real people and how reliable conclusions are derived from such analysis. The field school experience teaches both. Students often use their field school experience to plan and/or conduct theses and dissertations.

By engaging in supervised research in cultures very different from their own, students: learn what is universal and what is culturally specific in the process of community development; develop research skills applicable to collaborative, interdisciplinary teamwork; combine secondary and primary data gathering methods to obtain results grounded in empirical reality; understand diverse development policies and their impacts at the human and community levels; analyse community development political dynamics and processes at the community level; and strengthen human and organizational capacity for generating participatory research relationships with communities.

Each field school consists of a sequence of phases including a preparatory planning semester and an 8–10 week supervised research project planned and conducted jointly by and host-country students and faculty. The first phase is typically a year or so of identifying potential international academic and local government or nongovernmental organization collaborators, site and project identification and selection, and grant proposal preparation. The second preparatory phase occurs approximately five months prior to the field school in which faculty and students who intend to enroll in the field school review literature on the history, theory and practice of community development in the country and communities where that year's field school will be held, and do more specific project planning in frequent consultation with faculty and project partners from the host country who contribute reference material, empirical data, planning feedback and ideas through email and video or telenet conference linkage. The third (field school implementation) phase begins with faculty and early-arriving students checking living arrangements on-site. Then as students arrive, local orientation seminars are taught by and host faculty during the first week and students begin meeting with their organizational field placements where they will conduct their projects.

Students spend about 8 weeks completing two tasks: (a) a collaborative participatory research and action project to which all contribute as members of the research team supervised by faculty and (b) an individual research project which they develop concurrently with faculty guidance on a subject of their choosing. Prior to departing the host communities, students present any preliminary findings to their partner organizations, local authorities, and host-country faculty and students. The final, post-field school phase begins after the students return to the research teams (still working collaboratively), conduct more in-depth analyses, present their project results in their home university and

at conferences, and publish them, if possible, for dissemination in the host country as well as in the US.

2007 field school. The above details the planned general field school model. Now we will review the actual process we were able to realize in Guangxi. The overarching theme of international field school was migration, but we were concerned with a complexity of interdependent issues which affect provincial China and have remained relatively understudied by the West. Specifically, Guangxi was an ideal action research site because it is representative of the vast areas of China where economic development has been slower, and where health, education and other social, physical, and political changes have lagged behind. We planned to conduct four inter-related research projects with various local Chinese partners. Those projects focused on (1) rural needs and development issues, (2) urbanization and urban planning/development, (3) understanding and improving community health promotion efforts to prevent various chronic diseases related to dietary practices, and (4) quality of Chinese secondary education and challenges of teaching and learning English. The two main areas of focus for this article are what happened with the rural and urban projects.

Our host collaborating organizations in China included the foreign languages department of a regional university in Guangxi, which provided interpretation and translation services, assistance with contacts and entrée with local agencies, three faculty collaborators, and most of our host student collaborators, many of whom were also social science and social work majors; plus the school of public administration at a major research university in Guangxi, which also provided faculty, students, and local connections for the urban needs assessment project. In addition, a small international community development nongovernmental organization advised our team on rural ethnic minority populations in the region.

The design of the rural and urban community needs assessment projects

Rural project plan/goals

The intended rural needs assessment included a multitude of methods including logic modelling, ethnography, village-wide surveys, and a photovoice project with village children. Unfortunately, we were not able to perform any of these formal data collections except for informal observations. Local bureaucratic officials insisted on letters of approval from higher level government officials who explained to us that we did not need such letters. In short, we were sent in circles.

Our multi-method design was an attempt to triangulate rural needs in various villages in Guangxi province. We also wanted to include the unique voice of village children to help better understand village life as well as facilitate communication among generations. The following briefly overviews our intended methods to show what methods we hoped to adapt to Chinese contexts with the help of our collaborators. We will discuss some of the challenges we experienced and our actual outcomes in a later section.

First, we wanted to speak with various village leaders as a group to get their feedback on village needs. In order to facilitate this process, we wanted to introduce and utilize the method of logic modelling as a way of conducting structured brainstorming. Logic modelling is a visual model which maps out distal and proximal goals as well as actionable

steps. It then allows the user to map a trajectory of potential (intentional and unintentional) consequences. Logic modelling is becoming an increasingly popular method in the social sciences, and especially in community-based research. It is used by community psychologists in community and organizational work as a way to measure outcomes (Minnich *et al.* 2006) as well as being a tool for highlighting the community's shared beliefs, determining expected results and formulating strategies for implementing programmes, projects and social change efforts (Hernandez and Hodges 2006, Westfall *et al.* 2006, Kaplan *et al.* 2006). Furthermore, it can be used to encourage critical thinking (Ellerman *et al.* 2006).

Our second intended method was collecting data via ethnographic observation. Ethnography can yield a much richer description of life than many inquiry methods. This method typically consists of embedding oneself in the community of interest and making observations, taking field notes, formally and informally engaging in discussions with community members. However 'embeddedness' is one of the key aspects of a successful ethnography so it is a demonstrably time-consuming social science method. For this reason, collaborating with local researchers who are more familiar with the local culture is especially important. Ethnographic methods have successfully been used in Chinese villages in recent years (Pearson and Liu 2002, Yang 2000, Farquhar 1996). We intended to use the ethnographic method of field observation to help us better understand what village leaders report about village needs.

Once we determined community needs via communication with village leaders and our own field observations, we would have been able to develop a survey to distribute throughout the village. Because we wanted a representative sample, we anticipated distributing the surveys at an event that involves most villagers, such as market-day or another village-wide event. Running parallel to our triangulation of village needs was a planned photovoice project that would have involved village children. Photovoice is a participatory research and action method used to empower participants to personally identify and report what is important to them in their communities (Wang and Burris 1997). Photovoice has become a popular method to connect to difficult-to-reach populations and disempowered groups, both adults and children (Wang *et al.* 2004, Killion and Wang 2000). The photovoice method has been used successfully in rural China. Caroline Wang conducted one of the first photovoice projects with village women in Yunnan province, and the method was used to effect social change in the areas of girls' education, women's entrepreneurship, and day care (www.photovoice.com).

Urban project plan/goals

The urban needs assessment project easily found social science and social work junior faculty and students at the regional host university who were interested in collaborating with us. Focusing on our theme of migration, we were referred by one of our early Chinese research partners to the planning research office of one of the fastest growing small cities in Guangxi. Because of their city's population explosion, we proposed a project to assess the changing needs of its residents, especially the many residents migrating from rural areas. Negotiations slowed. The staff of that office avoided responding to our repeated proposals; eventually, they requested our help assessing the condition and adequacy of the city's physical infrastructure of roads, sewer and water systems, etc. We did not have civil engineering expertise, but we were prepared to systematically and objectively assess more

micro-level neighbourhood physical conditions, such as public and private property maintenance, beautification, disrepair, litter, graffiti, and use of outdoor space using the Block Environmental Inventory (Perkins *et al.* 1992, Perkins and Taylor 1996), which has been used and adapted in many different countries. But as they did not seem interested in either social or micro-environmental needs, we sought another city government partner.

We then met with a city and regional planning official in our larger host city who initially did not see the point in obtaining residents' perceptions of neighbourhood problems or satisfaction with services. Upon reading our draft survey, however, he immediately saw both its benign intent and its potential practical value and supported our proposal for a needs/assets assessment study in the growing neighbourhood near the university. The only obstacle was to get approval from the government official representing that area of the city. The plans stalled again.

The field school was nearly half over and once again we had to try to find new partners and restart the urban project from the beginning. Our next contact was with the head of the school of public administration at a major research university in the region. The surprisingly quick and positive response was a great relief after all our prior travails. He identified a faculty member and several public administration graduate students interested in our project. Unlike our experience in the regional city, we had no trouble with either the government Foreign Affairs Office or the university administration, which were more used to international exchanges and their potential benefits.

We still needed a project site and fortunately the public administration dean knew the mayor of a small city near the Vietnam border. The mayor had attended the public administration school at the research university and he quickly agreed to allow the data collection to occur in his city. Four representatives (one faculty supervisor, one graduate student – originally from West Africa, and two Chinese social science students) of the original urban project team travelled to the provincial capital to meet with the Chinese public administration team of one faculty and three graduate students. These eight worked together very efficiently and quickly refined and retranslated the semi-structured resident survey assessing community social and environmental needs, services, and assets (see Appendix).

We then all travelled to the border town, where we were met by local government officials who were extremely helpful. We were given hotel space to conduct the survey administration training, an experience that was clearly new to the Chinese students, who were fortunately quick learners. To avoid biasing survey responses, the faculty and African-American student were given a tour of the area while two of the Chinese students who were also on the rural team conducted field observations and informal interviews in two nearby rural villages and the urban survey was conducted by the Chinese public administration faculty and students using a convenience sample in various public spaces near the city centre. Respondents were paid five yuan for completing the 10-minute survey.² Open-ended survey responses and field notes were translated into English independently by Chinese student members of the urban project.

Summary of urban and rural social development need assessment results

Rural project summary

A summary of the data from the rural needs assessment is based on informal observation and conversations only. Accordingly, these observations should not be taken as

generalizable but they can offer insight into potential areas for social development research in this particular region in China. In sum, the most important distinction about villages was determined by their remoteness and commodity of production. Both subsistence- and market-oriented villages were informally observed.

Return migration was difficult because of the remoteness and poor road conditions leading to some villages. In one remote village, a bus ran only on days ending in 2, 5 and 8. This made it quite difficult for villagers to make it to the local town market and buy or sell goods. Satisfaction with life in villages was mixed, for example, one respondent was happy with the development the village leader was able to achieve, such as installing taps for running water and covering internal village roads with concrete by securing government funding for village improvement, even though the village was poor and remote. However, as we sat in the back of a tractor and bumped along the road leading into her village, she said in response to the poor condition of the roads leading to her village, 'Our government needs to pay more attention to us'. She was an example of a young adult who migrated out and did not return often. Most university students we met who were from villages were the daughters or sons of former or current village leaders.

The increased trend of out-migration from rural areas should not be considered an indication of a lack of attachment to place. It seemed that rural to urban migration was the consequence of necessity or opportunity. Several respondents indicated that they had a fond attachment to their home village. We visited a man who ran a kindergarten in town and also had an apartment there, but he was very proud to show us where he was breaking ground to build a new house for him and his family in his childhood village. Closer to the city, we saw much younger people remaining in villages, but the farther away, the demographic changed to older adults and young children. This tells us that the special needs of the very young and the elderly should be focused on in needs assessments in certain villages (Xiang 2007).

As far as economic issues are concerned, rice farmers had some of the lowest income, but fish farming in some areas was quite lucrative. So much so that families were able to build two-story houses from their profits. The authors also engaged in an informal comparison of 'closed' vs. tourist villages. While the authors could travel freely to many villages, there were a few villages in which the authors were asked by village and town leaders to not take pictures at all, much less collect any formal data. For example, in one 'closed' village, one of the authors was told, 'The Japanese³ were the first to arrive in our village, you were the second'. While 'closed' villages struggled more economically, tourist villages seemed to run the risk of replacing authenticity with tourist enticement. Also, in tourist villages, this was the first time we saw urban to rural migration with entrepreneurs moving into villages to open cafés or lodging facilities.

Guangxi is an autonomous region that consists of many different ethnic minorities. It is important to consider their unique concerns when engaging in any type of social development effort. For example, an informal discussion with a non-profit small business developer living in Guangxi near Dong ethnic minority villages highlighted that a significant threat for these villages was the fire risk. Traditional Dong housing is made entirely of wood and connected together throughout the village, so if one house catches on fire, the entire village is in danger. This is an example of how a needs assessment could determine the need for a fire prevention system and then recommend that any social development projects adequately consider such a system.

Urban project summary

Unlike the rural team, the urban team was able to conduct formal, albeit brief, data collection. The urban needs/assets survey obtained a modest convenience sample of 48 adults (67% males). Most were local residents, although a few lived outside the town, but knew the town well enough to complete the survey. The mean age of the males was 41.4 and of the females: 36.8. Homeowners made up 65% of the sample. Fifty-two percent of the sample was of the Han ethnic majority and 48% of the large Zhuang minority. Forty-eight percent had finished middle school, about one third had a high-school education, and 18.8% had graduated college. The median monthly income of the sample was between 800 and 1,500 yuan.

Of all the possible local problems we asked about, the only one even approaching a moderate level of concern was unemployment. All the others were identified by most residents as 'not a problem' or only a 'small' problem. When asked what areas of the community need the most improvement, the responses were quite varied. The most common were public safety/security and street lighting, but they were identified by only six respondents each, followed by the environment and maintenance of public property.

Asking about local services resulted in more critical responses: residents were only moderately satisfied with all the city services and neighbourhood resources. Respondents were most satisfied with fire protection, but even that was just 3.6 on a 1-to-5 scale. Residents were least satisfied with the area health centre (mean=2.78), but that was not very far below any of the other services, including the responsiveness of local officials, with which residents were moderately satisfied (mean=3.0). Residents were asked where they would go if they had a problem in their neighbourhood and the most common responses were to call the police or solve the problem oneself. The third most common response was to tell their block committee representative, but only 12.5% said that.

We also asked what residents liked the most in their community and the most common response was 'don't know' (21%), followed by working out, walking or exercising (16.7%), and playing mahjong or other games (14.6%). Respondents were asked where in their neighbourhood they would take an out-of-town visitor. Responses varied and were mostly nonspecific ('no place worth visiting/no idea/nowhere', 'anywhere', 'no response'). This was perhaps the most telling result of the whole needs assessment. We knew from touring the town that there was a reasonably attractive town centre with a plaza next to a stream and shops. There was also beautiful, green mountainous countryside nearby, an historic border frontier with a small museum where famous negotiations had taken place less than 20 kilometres away, and a spectacularly scenic waterfall approximately a two hour drive away. But most residents did not feel they had anyplace specific worth showing visitors, thus suggesting the need for either the development of a place that might attract locals as well as tourists for community social and economic development or a local publicity campaign to make residents more aware of the attractions they already have, or perhaps a combination of the two.

Methodological limitations

We must acknowledge that both the qualitative rural need assessment and the quantitative urban assessment project had major methodological limitations. They were always intended to be small, relatively brief demonstration projects, as much or more for the

purpose of applied, community research training for the students as for scientific or social development planning purposes. Even those modest goals were greatly reduced due to the delays described above. The qualitative study would have been significantly strengthened if more time, interviews, and observations in the rural villages and the Photovoice and logic modelling projects were permitted. The quantitative study also should be taken as merely illustrative of what local residents or officials, with or without the help of students and experts, could accomplish in a very short amount of time. The convenience sample of 48 adults is not enough to yield stable or reliable results, to adequately represent the entire town, or to yield adequate statistical power to obtain significant results. But we do not claim to generalize the data beyond the people and places (a few villages and one small city) visited on the few particular days over a four-week period in June–July, 2007, when we and our Chinese student collaborators were able to observe and collect data.

Implications and recommendations for future international collaboration

One lesson of our field school experience was the need for better and more regular communication with the right Chinese partners for advance planning and government approvals. In fact, we had done substantial pre-field school collaborative planning with our Chinese faculty, student, and agency partners. In most countries, it is best to leave obtaining any needed government approvals up to the host collaborators. We largely did just that but also had to describe our plans in some detail to the Chinese Embassy to obtain our business visas. That level of approval was enough to satisfy the provincial Foreign Affairs Office, but evidently not the more remote local government, who were less accustomed to foreign researchers. Where that was perceived as uncontroversial (with the health and education projects), it received relatively quick local government approval, which helped those projects proceed with little difficulty and good support, not only from the relevant local agencies (which we also had for the urban project), but importantly consistent support from the Foreign Affairs Offices in the city government and the Office of International Cooperation and Exchange at the local university. In contrast, the rural and urban needs assessment projects never received official approval by the regional host university's department of social sciences and social work, despite significant interest among several individual faculty and students. We were told (only after our arrival, unfortunately) that the head of that department was generally suspicious of foreign collaboration and unsupportive of international exchanges of any kind. He even saw little value in his students and faculty learning any new social intervention or applied research methods.

The inconsistent support we experienced from the city Foreign Affairs Office and the university Office of International Cooperation and Exchange (varying by project) was easier to understand in retrospect. Although we cannot be certain, we presume they were responding to higher administrative dictates to assist the field school's two perceived uncontroversial projects and prevent our two needs assessment projects. We tried repeatedly to convince them that the intent of the urban and rural projects was completely benign and constructive. We pointed out that community needs assessments serve the goals of better-informed local decision-making (and thus better services) and by giving residents a voice, local government is perceived as more caring and responsive. In other words, needs assessment serves the purpose of system maintenance and improvement, or 'first-order change'. It does not generally lead to fundamental system transformation, or

'second-order change'. But without opportunities for meaningful participation or 'voice', systems inevitably lose legitimacy and support.

Thus, unnecessary and unfortunate fears of what we might discover or disseminate led to disappointment for half of the Field School participants and their agency partners who were unable to complete the full needs assessment projects as planned. But it unintentionally provided a valuable lesson for all the Chinese and students and faculty about the intransigence of real-world political and academic bureaucracies. If our field school had resulted in the full implementation of the urban and rural projects, we hope that our collaborators and students could have gained more experience with practical models and knowledge about social needs assessment methodology.

Conclusions

Rural and urban needs assessments are useful tools for academics and practitioners to better understand social development issues. Furthermore, international collaboration can provide a beneficial exchange of information despite some of the difficulties it poses for both foreign and local collaborators. Our experience revealed that there are a number of social development issues which can be identified and addressed if inquirers are equipped with proper tools and policy-makers with proper information. These include issues related to migration between rural and urban areas, and social, physical, and economic conditions in both urban neighbourhoods and villages. In short, simple needs assessment skills and practices are often critical at the local level because centralized social development research and planning conducted at the regional, provincial, or national levels, while always important, may not always be able to respond quickly, accurately, or sensitively to particular needs and concerns at the local community level. Even though the process of successfully navigating the local bureaucracy was challenging, time-consuming, and at times frustrating, we and our Chinese partners both learned a great amount about each other's ideas, methods, and practices. We further believe there is a great potential and value to assessing local needs, in systematic and participatory ways in both rural and urban areas, for China to continue on its path of social development.

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Notes

1. Bill Partridge, founder of the Vanderbilt Field School, contributed to this overview of the programme. For more information, see: http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/Microsites/Academic_Department/Human_and_Organizational_Development/Fieldschool_in_Intercultural_Education.xml

2. All travel, survey and other project costs were paid for by the field school.
3. We presume the villager was referring to the Japanese invasion which was over 70 years earlier.

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Appendix. Community needs assessment (Chinese version available from authors)

Douglas D. Perkins, Courtney Gould, Ma Hengzhu, Benjamin Siankam, Wang Ying,
and Sasha Zheng

Thank you for your assistance. We are researchers from _____ and would like to understand the needs and problems in your community. We will collect information and report the average responses of interviewees to government officials, but will not report the separate responses of any individuals. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Please be honest in your evaluations, as your name and answers will be kept confidential. Please do not include your name or any other identifying information. Thank you.

I. On a 1 to 5 scale where 1 is NOT A PROBLEM and 5 is a VERY BIG PROBLEM, please rate how much of a problem you think the following things are in your neighbourhood:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Graffiti | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Loud neighbours | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Homelessness | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Poor physical condition of buildings | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Hazards from poor electrical or gas installation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Gang activity | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. Sale of illegal drugs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Alcohol abuse | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Drug abuse | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. Domestic violence | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. Gender inequality | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. Children who live without their parents | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. Lack of care for elders | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. Unemployment | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. Open dumping of waste, refuse, or trash | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. Water contamination | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. Soil contamination | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. Air pollution | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

19. If you answered 4 or 5 to any of the above, please describe the problem and its location:

II. On a 1 to 5 scale where 1 is VERY UNSATISFIED, 5 is VERY SATISFIED, and an asterisk (*) is DON'T KNOW or NOT APPLICABLE, please rate your satisfaction with the following services and amenities in your neighbourhood:

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Police protection | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 2. Fire protection | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 3. Garbage collection | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |

| | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4. Public transportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 5. Water and sewer services | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 6. Parks | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 7. After school care | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 8. Availability of affordable child care | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 9. Condition of streets | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 10. Quality of nearby primary health care | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 11. Quality of public schools in this neighbourhood | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 12. Places for groups to meet | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 13. Entertainment facilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 14. Exercise (sport/athletic) facilities | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 15. Your neighbourhood representative's responsiveness to your needs | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |
| 16. Your overall satisfaction with your neighbourhood as a place to live | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | * |

III. 1. Where would you go, or who would you go to, if you had a problem in your neighbourhood?

2. Do you have any additional comments about your neighbourhood representative officials?

3. What area of your neighbourhood needs the most improvement?

4. What is the one thing you like most about your neighbourhood?

5. If you had an out-of-town visitor, where in your neighbourhood would you take them?

- IV. 1. Are you a resident of ____? Yes No
2. Do you own or rent your home? Own Rent
3. In what neighbourhood do you live? _____
4. Are you a male or female? Male Female
5. What is your age range? 18-25 26-35 36-45 46-55 56-65 66-75 OVER 76
6. How would you identify yourself? Han Dong Miao Zhuang Yao Other: _____
7. How many years of school did you complete? did not complete elementary elementary junior high school senior high school university beyond university
8. What is your approximate total household income (RMB) from all sources every month? under 500 501-1600 1601-3000 above 3001