

# The Hidden Gaps in Rural Development: Examining Peasant–NGO Relations through a Post-earthquake Recovery Project in Sichuan, China

Qing Liu<sup>\*</sup>, Raymond Yu Wang<sup>†</sup> and Heping Dang<sup>‡</sup>

## Abstract

While much of the scholarly work on the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China focuses on their relations with the state, this paper adopts an anthropological approach to explore previously understudied peasant–NGO relations through the lens of a village-level post-earthquake recovery project in Sichuan. The findings highlight three main types of gaps between the NGO and local villagers: the gaps between the villagers' immediate needs and the NGO's long-term development plan; the gaps between the villagers' pragmatic concerns and the “building a new socialist countryside” campaign; and the gaps between the private and collective economies. In spite of the project's unsatisfactory outcome, the NGO did not consider the project a failure. We argue that these gaps were, to a great extent, attributable to the continuing development of the institutional values of NGOs, which guide the transition of Chinese NGOs from traditional charities to modern philanthropic organizations.

**Keywords:** NGOs; peasant–NGO relations; post-earthquake recovery; rural development; Wenchuan earthquake

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It has been more than eight years since the Wenchuan 汶川 earthquake struck Sichuan province and other areas of south-west China on 12 May 2008. The impact of the earthquake was immense: around 87,000 people were killed or went missing, and more than 374,000 were injured. Along with 50,000 destroyed villages and towns, the earthquake led to a direct economic loss of US\$125

\* The University of Hong Kong. Email: [shszby@163.com](mailto:shszby@163.com).

† Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China. Email: [wangyu86@mail.sysu.edu.cn](mailto:wangyu86@mail.sysu.edu.cn).

‡ The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen, China. Email: [dangheping@cuhk.edu.cn](mailto:dangheping@cuhk.edu.cn) (corresponding author).

billion, making it one of the most catastrophic disasters in contemporary Chinese history.<sup>1</sup>

For the Chinese government and the earthquake victims, a challenge greater than these direct losses has been the post-earthquake recovery, which involves multifarious interconnected and interdependent processes of planning and redevelopment.<sup>2</sup> It was reported that the Chinese government invested a total of 857 billion yuan in Sichuan within a three-year period after the earthquake.<sup>3</sup> The money was mainly spent on rebuilding infrastructure such as roads, bridges, hospitals and schools, as well as on urban and rural permanent housing and industry development. The massive scale of development in Sichuan province and other earthquake-affected areas has given rise to many problems pertaining to strategic planning, resource allocation and cross-sectoral coordination, despite various regulations and policies being promulgated to guide the reconstruction process.<sup>4</sup>

The post-earthquake recovery was commonly deemed to be a state-centric process owing to the dominant role played by the Chinese government in every aspect of its planning and operation. For the government, the response to the Wenchuan earthquake was not simply a matter of house rebuilding or victim assistance, but rather a stage upon which to perform, a chance to promote its larger development agenda and to enhance its legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the reconstruction of earthquake-affected areas was treated as an opportunity to facilitate the implementation of existing state policies such as “building a new socialist countryside” (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xinnongcun* 建设社会主义新农村, hereafter BNSC), urbanization and industrialization.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in practice, the post-earthquake recovery process was shaped simultaneously by local historical, cultural and political conditions that were established prior to the earthquake.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the practical needs of local communities were largely ignored.<sup>8</sup> Some of the locals blamed the state for the failure of promised economic miracles,<sup>9</sup> and some even protested against the government when they believed that they were unfairly or unreasonably treated in the reconstruction process.<sup>10</sup>

Under these circumstances, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as a third party in society, have become a supplementary force for the promotion of post-earthquake relief and reconstruction. Following the Wenchuan

1 United Nations Economic and Social Council 2008.

2 For the theoretical division of the “three stages” of post-disaster recovery after the Wenchuan earthquake, see Wang, Xiyi 2010.

3 Gov.cn. 2011. “Guanyu 5.12 Wenchuan teda dizhen zaihou huifu chongjian qingkuang tongbao” (Notification of the achievements of post-disaster recovery after the 5.12 Wenchuan earthquake), 11 November, [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-10/14/content\\_1969461.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2011-10/14/content_1969461.htm). Accessed 14 September 2016.

4 For a summary of related regulations and policies, see Hui 2009; Dunford and Li 2011.

5 Schneider and Hwang 2014; Sorace 2015; 2016; Xu 2016.

6 Abramson and Qi 2011; Sorace 2014.

7 Deng, Feng 2010.

8 Dunford and Li 2011; Sorace 2014; Sorace and Hurst 2016.

9 Sorace 2015.

10 Xin 2013.

earthquake, more than 300 NGOs, both domestic and international, and over three million volunteers visited affected areas to help with the rescue, relief and reconstruction work.<sup>11</sup> NGOs responded to the disaster efficiently by setting up collaborative and communication networks between themselves, enterprises and different levels of governments.<sup>12</sup> They devoted their resources to a variety of relief projects such as fundraising, organizing blood-donation drives, delivering materials, mobilizing volunteers and providing on-site services.<sup>13</sup> NGOs have also been prominent in assisting marginalized communities and vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities, poverty-stricken areas and parents who lost children in the earthquake.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, NGOs have played a role in mediating conflict between the state and earthquake victims.<sup>15</sup> The unprecedented and active civil response to the earthquake has marked the years since 2008 as “China’s new era of philanthropy, volunteerism and NGOs.”<sup>16</sup>

Current studies of the emergence and development of NGOs in China focus on their complicated relations with the state. For instance, one of the hottest academic debates in this field of study is whether NGOs can attain autonomy and promote a robust civil society in authoritarian China.<sup>17</sup> Some believe that the state’s “corporatist strategy,” adopted since the 1980s, has to a great extent succeeded in co-opting NGOs and maintaining control over resources.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this corporatism, NGOs are dominated by government at various levels,<sup>19</sup> making it difficult for them to promote civil society.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, others argue that NGOs are able to develop their own institutional agenda and enhance their autonomy through active negotiation with the state.<sup>21</sup> The interactions between NGOs and the state can be diverse and strategically collaborative rather than dominated unilaterally by the state.<sup>22</sup> Seen from this perspective, NGO–state relations are “fluid and multidirectional.”<sup>23</sup>

The period of post-earthquake recovery was a unique time when it was imperative for both NGOs and local governments to forge a new relationship in the process of learning about and interacting with each other. Although the response to the earthquake stimulated the development of civil society,<sup>24</sup> NGOs still encountered many “problematic, institutional and group weaknesses” in

11 Bao 2009.

12 Shieh and Deng 2011; Lu and Xu 2014.

13 Yang 2008; Teets 2009; Zhang and Yu 2009; Wang, Xiyong 2010; Huang, Zhou and Wei 2011; Roney 2011.

14 Menefee and Nordtveit 2012; Saban 2013; Sorace 2014.

15 Fulda, Li and Song 2012.

16 Qian 2008.

17 Ma 2002; Spires 2011a; 2011b; Hsu and Jiang 2015.

18 Heurlin 2010.

19 Frolic 1997; Deng, Guosheng 2010; Lai et al. 2015

20 Unger and Chan 1996.

21 Wang, Ming 2001; Saich 2000; Watson 2008.

22 Yang 2005; Kang and Han 2008; Shieh 2009; Spires 2011a; Fulda, Li and Song 2012; Teets 2013; Hasmath and Hsu 2016.

23 Hsu and Jiang 2015, 104.

24 Yang 2008; Teets 2009; Shieh and Deng 2011; Saban 2013.

China's specific political context.<sup>25</sup> The roles and activities of NGOs have remained largely constrained by the government.<sup>26</sup> For instance, NGOs can engage in social service provision but not social advocacy,<sup>27</sup> as maintaining social stability remains a priority for local governments.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the emergence and development of NGOs could potentially nurture a "state-led civil society"<sup>29</sup> but not a substantial political democracy.<sup>30</sup>

While much of the scholarly inquiry into NGO development focuses on NGO–state relations, little is known about the responses of local communities to NGOs. This is particularly true in the context of post-earthquake recovery where peasants and NGOs are directly involved in multifarious activities throughout the operation of rural development projects. This article intends to fill this void by describing "what was going on" when an NGO rural development project was synchronized with the process of post-earthquake recovery. This approach was chosen to examine the relationship between peasants and NGOs for two main reasons. First, rural community development is one of the most popular working areas for NGOs in China. Since the 1980s, a growing number of NGOs have initiated development projects with the objective of improving rural living standards and alleviating poverty.<sup>31</sup> In the rural areas of Sichuan, NGOs have carried out many development projects with the vision of villager empowerment and post-earthquake recovery since 2008. Second, development projects are often mingled with the micro-politics of the targeted rural community.<sup>32</sup> Interactions between NGOs and local communities are more diverse and complicated than is the case for engagement projects that target specific groups, for example youth education, disabled or elderly services, or women's protection.

Existing anthropological studies have pointed out that wide gaps exist between development agencies (i.e. governments and NGOs) and local communities. These gaps include inconsistencies in the logics behind the project,<sup>33</sup> different knowledge systems on development intervention,<sup>34</sup> incompatible norms and methods of project execution,<sup>35</sup> as well as divergent objectives for specific project operations.<sup>36</sup> Ignoring these gaps can result in the failure of development projects.<sup>37</sup> However, these gaps are not easily overcome, even when they are identified by development agencies, because development practices are largely shaped

25 Teets 2009, 345.

26 Roney 2011.

27 Xu 2014.

28 Cai 2008.

29 Frolic 1997.

30 Spires 2011a.

31 Zhuang 2009; Jacka 2010.

32 McAreavey 2006.

33 Olivier de Sardan 1988; 2005.

34 Scott 1998; Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Briggs 2005.

35 Tan-Mullins and Chen 2012.

36 Ferguson 1990; Hilhorst 2003.

37 Porter, Allen and Thompson 1991. For another summary of the gaps between development agencies and local communities, as well as the consequences, see Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Crewe and Axelby 2012.

and influenced by given institutional constraints.<sup>38</sup> This paper follows this line of inquiry. It uses a case study of a rural development project, conducted by a Chinese NGO, to examine peasant–NGO relations in the special context of post-earthquake recovery. It probes into the socio-historical settings and dynamics of the peasants' reactions when the aspirations, requests and values of the peasants diverged from those of the NGO. We outline the divergent objectives, values, perceptions and behaviour of the NGO and local peasants in regard to how the programme was executed, as well as the institutional constraints imposed on the NGO, to demonstrate how these gaps reshaped the operation and outcomes of a rural development project.

### The Selected Case and Research Methods

This study examines a post-earthquake recovery project delivered by the China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD). The project was carried out in Happiness Village, which is located in Deyang city in Sichuan.<sup>39</sup> The village is an exemplar of an unexceptional rural community. It covers a total area of 2,200 *mu* 亩 and had a total population of around 1,400 in 2008. There are no mineral resources or successful secondary industries in the village. Local villagers depend on farming and non-agricultural jobs in urban areas for their main sources of income. The Wenchuan earthquake left 27 villagers dead, including four children, and ten injured. More than 93 per cent of the village's farmhouses collapsed. Village roads were left impassable and the power system was shut down. Considerable damage was also caused to irrigation facilities. In addition to the severe damage to basic village infrastructure, the economic losses borne by individual villagers, including loss of furniture, poultry and livestock, were catastrophic.

Three months after the Wenchuan earthquake, the CFRD selected Happiness Village to carry out a recovery project on the recommendation of the township government. Founded in the late 1980s, the CFRD is one of the most important and influential philanthropic organizations in China, particularly in the field of rural development. It has more than 100 employees and hundreds of volunteers. With support from various sectors of society, the CFRD has received annual donations of around 200 million yuan since 2008.

Initially, the CFRD donated 4.5 million yuan to the Happiness Village project. This was divided into two main components: around 44 per cent of the donation was allocated to the reconstruction of local peasants' damaged houses, and the rest was allocated to improving villagers' livelihoods. It is worth noting that the operation of the project was not fully consistent with the original plan of the CFRD. In fact, the project was reshaped by a series of negotiations, compromises and confrontations as it gradually moved forward.

38 Lewis et al. 2003

39 All names of organizations, villages and people have been changed to protect confidentiality.

We adopted ethnographic methods to explore how local villagers and the CFRD viewed, interpreted and executed the recovery project. Intensive fieldwork was conducted between July and December 2014. However, we had been following this case since 2009 and had visited the village more than ten times between then and 2014. This enabled us to narrate the relationships between the CFRD and local villagers accurately.

This study used a combination of data collection methods, including participatory observation, in-depth interviews, informal interviews, secondary data and daily field notes. Data collection was directed by Glaser's principle: "all is data."<sup>40</sup> Key informants, including representatives from both the CFRD (project officers) and Happiness Village (village cadres, local programme managers, active participants of the project, and opinion leaders), and other ordinary villagers were interviewed to objectively map out the informants' own perceptions, interests and behaviour. The secondary data mainly include official CFRD archival documents (for example, project proposals, reports and signed contracts) and the diaries and video materials of a project officer.

### **Long-Term Development and Immediate Needs**

Our analysis of peasant–NGO relations begins with the gap between the immediate needs of the villagers and the CFRD's long-term plans for its donation. According to the post-earthquake assessment conducted by the CFRD and its academic consultants, the reconstruction of damaged farmhouses was the local villagers' top priority. However, at the start of the project, the CFRD did not intend to distribute the donated money among the villagers for farmhouse reconstruction; they wanted instead to centrally manage and direct the donation towards improving villagers' livelihoods. There were two main reasons for this. First, the villagers would carry out the work of rebuilding their farmhouses with or without help from outsiders. Moreover, the average cost of farmhouse reconstruction per household was around 70,000 yuan,<sup>41</sup> which was significantly more than the amount of money (around 10,000 yuan) each family would receive if the CFRD equally distributed the entire donation. Thus, it seemed unnecessary to spend the entire donation on farmhouse reconstruction. Second, and more importantly, the CFRD saw more value in creating potential long-term benefits for the village than in meeting the villagers' immediate needs. The CFRD claimed that the majority of the villagers were only concerned with the present and did not think about the future. Therefore, according to the CFRD, planning the long-term development of Happiness Village was a more important task than farmhouse reconstruction.

However, the villagers believed otherwise. Their primary concern was rebuilding their farmhouses. After the earthquake, almost every family lived in

40 Glaser 2001.

41 Interview with local villagers, August 2014.

temporary accommodation, which they had constructed themselves from the remains (i.e. wood and tiles) of their damaged farmhouses. The temporary dwellings were chilly in winter and some had leaking roofs. Owing to the poor hygienic conditions, mice infestations were also a major problem.<sup>42</sup> Living in such squalid conditions, the villagers naturally wanted to start building permanent farmhouses as soon as possible. This was their first step back to a normal life. Some villagers worked as migrant workers outside Sichuan province and had returned to help with the reconstruction of their farmhouses; they expected the rebuilding of the houses to be completed quickly so that they could get back to the cities.

Money was a major problem for most households. Annual per capita income in Happiness Village was about 3,000 yuan in 2007.<sup>43</sup> Even with the financial support provided by the government, the villagers still could not afford to rebuild their farmhouses. The presumptive donation from the CFRD (around 10,000 yuan for each household), although not enough to rebuild a farmhouse, still represented a huge amount of money to the villagers. The donation was vitally important to the villagers as they struggled to cope with the enormous economic losses caused by the earthquake and the increasing costs of farmhouse reconstruction.<sup>44</sup> The villagers therefore hoped to receive the funds as soon as possible.

From the perspective of the local government and the village committee, the task of permanent farmhouse reconstruction was also a priority in the complex process of post-earthquake recovery. This prioritization was guided by the central government's overall plan of "settlement first, development later."<sup>45</sup> In principle, all the rural areas affected by the Wenchuan earthquake had to rebuild farmhouses as soon as possible, according to the provincial policy of "completing the three-year goals of the post-earthquake recovery within two years" (*sannian mubiao renwu liangnian jiben wancheng* 三年目标任务两年基本完成).<sup>46</sup> And indeed, one of the most important criteria in cadre performance evaluations during the post-earthquake recovery was the speed of reconstruction.<sup>47</sup> The township government even created a competition among villages to facilitate the reconstruction. Given this top-down pressure, the village cadres also expected the CFRD to disburse its donation to the villagers quickly.

As the villagers grew impatient and their enthusiasm for the recovery project waned, the CFRD realized that it would be impossible to carry out the long-term development plan until all farmhouse reconstruction had been completed. Meanwhile, it was the CFRD's sincere wish to help the victims of the earthquake

42 Ibid.

43 Interview with the Party secretary of Happiness Village, August 2011.

44 Chang et al. 2010

45 Dunford and Li 2011.

46 Sc.gov.cn. 2009. "Sichuan sheng renmin zhengfu bangongting guanyu yange yiju guihua he xieyi shishi zaihou fuhui chongjian xiangmu de tongzhi" (Notice of the General Office of the People's Government of Sichuan on strict implementation of the plan and agreement on post-disaster recovery after the 5.12 Wenchuan earthquake), 26 May, <http://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10464/10684/13655/2009/5/26/10368970.shtml>. Accessed 14 September 2016.

47 Sorace 2016.



despite their different plans. Thus, the CFRD decided to allocate around 2 million yuan to farmhouse reconstruction and earmark the remainder of the donation for livelihood improvement measures. The CFRD believed that this compromise met both the villagers' needs and its own organizational objective. However, the majority of the villagers were still unsatisfied. They demanded all of the donation, not just a part of it.

In sum, from the outset, the villagers and the CFRD had fundamentally divergent views on how the donation should be used. The CFRD emphasized the importance of balancing the community's short-term needs with long-term development in the post-earthquake recovery,<sup>48</sup> while local villagers were more concerned with their immediate living conditions than with plans for long-term development.<sup>49</sup>

### **Building the New Socialist Countryside and Rebuilding Damaged Farmhouses**

Although the CFRD agreed to allocate some of the donation directly to the villagers, disagreements arose over how and where the farmhouses should be built. The villagers simply wanted to use the money to build farmhouses that suited their own needs; however, the CFRD intended to dovetail the farmhouse reconstruction with the BNSC campaign.

The BNSC policy “was proclaimed at the end of 2005 during the fifth plenary session of the Sixteenth Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) Central Committee and officially approved as a government policy by the National People’s Congress in March 2006.”<sup>50</sup> Its primary purpose is to increase general social justice by reducing rural–urban disparities, as well as to strengthen the CCP’s governance of rural areas.<sup>51</sup> The BNSC campaign is a comprehensive system devised to tackle the “three rural issues” (*sannong wenti* 三农问题).<sup>52</sup> It covers a wide range of rural development problems including the socio-economic well-being of villagers.<sup>53</sup> Although the overarching objectives of the BNSC campaign have been generalized in 20 Chinese characters to cover productivity, living conditions, social atmosphere, appearances and democracy, its implementation varies significantly across contexts.<sup>54</sup> The outcomes are highly dependent on local conditions, including local financial resources, fiscal regulations and oversight,

48 Ingram et al. 2006

49 Olivier de Sardan 1988; Scott 1998.

50 Ahlers and Schubert 2009, 36.

51 Stepan, Han and Reeskens 2016.

52 Ahlers and Schubert 2009.

53 Ahlers 2014.

54 They are: advanced production (*shengchan fazhan*), rich livelihood (*shenghuo kuanyu*), civilized rural lifestyle (*xiangfeng wenming*), clean and tidy villages (*cunrong zhengjie*), and democratic management (*guanli minzhu*). See gov.cn. 2005. “Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu tuijin shehui zhuyi xinnongcun jianshe de ruogan yijian” (Notice of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and State Council on advancing the work of building the new socialist countryside), 31 December, [http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content\\_254151.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_254151.htm). Accessed 14 September 2016.



and performance evaluations, as well as local cadres' attitudes and experiences.<sup>55</sup> In other words, there is no fixed pattern for the implementation of the BNSC policy at the local level. Without any adequately objective and assessable criteria, "clean and tidy villages" has become a main component of BNSC in practice, as new farmhouses and rural infrastructure (i.e. roads, irrigation and water supply systems) are observable accomplishments that demonstrate progress.<sup>56</sup>

### *Centralized peasant residence*

Among the diverse facets of the BNSC campaign, "centralized peasant residence" is particularly appealing to some local governments, primarily because of the potential extra revenue that can be generated from land leasing.<sup>57</sup> The CFRD also favoured the idea of centralized peasant residence for the farmhouse reconstruction in Happiness Village, but not for fiscal reasons. It believed that it would be easier to construct basic infrastructure, such as roads, a water supply system and a cultural activity centre, around a centralized community.<sup>58</sup> However, the CFRD's project officer admitted that the centralization proposal was largely based on the CFRD's past experiences of rural development and knowledge learned from literature. In reality, the CFRD had no extra budget for improving the basic infrastructure of the village.<sup>59</sup>

The CFRD's proposal was consonant with the agenda of the township government and the village committee,<sup>60</sup> both of which strongly encouraged centralizing peasant residences in a designated area. They expected a "model village" to be built out of the farmhouse reconstruction.<sup>61</sup> The village committee pushed the plan once it had become a governmental experiment at the township level. However, it refused to allow any public participation,<sup>62</sup> despite central government guidelines stating that local peasants should be involved in the process of farmhouse reconstruction.<sup>63</sup> The village cadres declared that those who failed to build their new farmhouses in the designated area would not be entitled to a share of the donation from the CFRD. The CFRD tacitly supported this decision, and as a result, most households had to comply with the centralized residence principle.<sup>64</sup>

55 Ahlers and Schubert 2013.

56 Looney 2015.

57 Ong 2014.

58 Interview with the CFRD's project officer, August 2011.

59 Ibid.

60 For more on the governmental campaign behind the BNSC programme and concentrated residence, see Abramson and Qi 2011; Sorace 2014.

61 Interview with the village cadres and CFRD's project officer, 2011.

62 Looney 2015.

63 Sc.gov.cn. 2008. "Regulation on post-Wenchuan earthquake recovery and reconstruction." 8 June, <http://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/10758/10759/10764/2012/7/26/10219700.shtml>. Accessed 14 September 2016.

64 There were certainly other factors that impelled villagers to rebuild their homes in the designated concentrated zones. For instance, village cadres declared that roads, water and electrical power would not

However, many villagers did not like the location for the new farmhouses for many reasons. The old farmhouses were much bigger than the new ones, as the latter were being built on land that was cultivated as farmland prior to the earthquake. According to the specifications for farmhouse reconstruction announced by the village committee and the CFRD, the new farmhouses in designated areas could only have up to 40 square metres of floor space per person in order to protect the agricultural land of the village.<sup>65</sup> The per capita area of the new farmhouses was divided into two parts: 30 square metres for living space and 10 square metres for production. The limits on space were a major constraint for the villagers, who raised livestock (i.e. pigs and chickens) as an important source of household income.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, many villagers claimed that the costs of the new farmhouses had increased owing to extra expenses for new facilities. In this sense, the divergent preferences regarding the location of the new farmhouses were actually a manifestation of the gap between the villagers' pragmatism and the shared ambition of the village committee and CFRD to follow the Party's BNSC agenda.

### *Designing the new farmhouses for the villagers*

The divergence in the interests of the local villagers and the CFRD widened as the CFRD tried to dictate the design of the new farmhouses. The CFRD preferred attractive, uniform houses – another common practice in BNSC in China.<sup>67</sup> At a cost of more than 100,000 yuan, the CFRD hired a few architects from Beijing, who, after visiting the village a few times, provided several tentative designs for the villagers' consideration. The villagers had to vote on these designs. The most popular one would be selected as the model for all the new farmhouses in Happiness Village.

Nevertheless, all the designs, which were drawn from the architects' romantic ideas of the countryside and how it should look, failed to satisfy the villagers' appetite for "modern" housing. The "beautiful" designs, which incorporated the bucolic setting of the village and traditional local culture, neither met the villagers' desire to live like urbanites nor fully provided the facilities that the villagers needed. From the villagers' perspective, maximum utilization of space was far more important than decoration. Furthermore, the costs of realizing the architects' designs were high; a few designs did not even consider a budget at all. The villagers used sarcastic terms, such as "American style" or "Beijing style," to ridicule the impractical designs.

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*footnote continued*

be provided for scattered residents. However, getting money from the CFRD donation was one of the major factors frequently mentioned by local villagers.

65 Interviews with the village director, local villagers, and CFRD's project officer in 2009 and 2011.

66 Similar situations also occurred in other "concentrated villages." See Ong 2014.

67 Looney 2015.

Although most of the villagers eventually agreed on one of the architects' designs in order to get the donation from the CFRD, many of them changed design details for functional and economic reasons, and some households did not follow the uniform design at all. The villagers' revisions upset the chosen architect, who believed that the fundamental connotation of his design was too difficult for laymen, namely the villagers, to understand. He claimed that the villagers had no right to revise his professional design. Although the CFRD tried to persuade the villagers to keep the construction of their farmhouses consistent with the design, these efforts appeared to have little impact on the villagers' actions.

The CFRD realized that its promotion of a uniform farmhouse design had dented its relationship with local villagers. The leaders of the CFRD in Beijing and its local relief office in Deyang discussed the dilemma of farmhouse reconstruction in Happiness Village during a teleconference in December 2008. They admitted that it was a mistake to insist on the architect's design. The CFRD concluded: "We should not attempt to make decisions for local villagers. We must respect the villagers. They know their real needs better than us. They have the freedom of reconstructing their farmhouses in their own ways. Neither we, nor the architects, should seek to impose our will on the villagers."<sup>68</sup>

## The Collective Economy and the Private Economy

### *The farmers' professional cooperative*

Long-term livelihood development had always been the CFRD's primary concern in Happiness Village. It embarked on this project long before the completion of the farmhouse reconstruction. Although there were several different ideas within the CFRD, after heated discussions with government officials, academics and entrepreneurs, the leaders of the CFRD, particularly the deputy secretary-general, confirmed that the livelihood improvement project should aim to revitalize the collective economy and sustain a better livelihood for all the villagers.

The first step of this project was to establish the Farmers' Professional Cooperative of Happiness Village (hereafter, the Cooperative), which had several advantages according to the CFRD. First, the Cooperative would organize a group of peasants who would then have stronger bargaining power collectively. The empowerment of the villagers might increase their competitiveness in the market.<sup>69</sup> Second, the Cooperative would not only provide social services to marginalized groups but would also facilitate the development of civil society in China.<sup>70</sup> Last, and most importantly, the Cooperative would receive policy support from the central government and this model would signify the trend in rural development.<sup>71</sup>

68 Internal document.

69 Zhou 2011.

70 Zhao 2011.

71 The central government enacted the Law of the People's Republic of China on Farmers' Professional Cooperatives in 2007 to promote and guide the development of farmers' professional cooperatives.

However, the term “cooperative” (*hezuoshe* 合作社) brought up some unpleasant memories for the villagers. They remembered the poor efficiency and ineffectiveness of the collective economy during the period of the people’s communes (*renmin gongshe* 人民公社). Although the CFRD clarified many times that the Cooperative was different from a commune, it could not convince the villagers that the problem of free-riders would be avoided. In addition, the failure of collective enterprises two decades ago also discouraged the villagers from participating in the collective economy. In the 1980s, collective-owned enterprises, which included small businesses set up for brick manufacturing, chicken and duck breeding, oil and bean curd production, were established in Happiness Village. In our interviews, the villagers often mentioned the chicken breeding business, which was considered to be an exemplar of the failed collective economy. Poor management and corruption bankrupted the chicken farm. Not only did the villagers receive nothing from the enterprise but they each had to pay off the village committee’s outstanding debt. Remembering these bad experiences, the majority of the local villagers had no confidence in any form of cooperative at all.

The villagers, who only believed in family-run operations and the private economy, demanded that the CFRD should distribute the remaining funds to each of the households. However, the CFRD overruled the villagers’ request. It threatened to withdraw what was left of the donation unless the villagers accepted the collective economy plan. Moreover, the CFRD insisted on retaining the right of veto over the Cooperative’s decisions so that it could maintain control over the direction and content of the long-term livelihood improvement project. As the CFRD had ultimate authority over the donation, the Cooperative was finally established.

The CFRD organized a local management team to run the project in the village. Current village cadres were not allowed to be director of the Cooperative in order to prevent over-centralization of power. The CFRD was confident that the locally elected management team would be both representative and capable; however, many problems emerged. A number of villagers raised questions about the procedural justice of the election and the integrity of the elected team members. For instance, some villagers claimed that the election was manipulated by village cadres and that they had not had the opportunity to vote in spite of the CFRD’s regulations. Villagers also claimed that the management team members could not be trusted because of their poor records – the director had failed with the chicken farm business in the 1980s and the secretary had been linked to corrupt activities when he worked as a primary school teacher in the village.

### *The agricultural company*

As the livelihood promotion project continued, the gulf between the CFRD and the villagers extended to the organization and management of the core components of the Cooperative, namely, the Edible Fungus Planting Company (hereafter the Company).

The edible fungus planting project started with a public bidding process. The successful bidder, who had 20 years of experience in edible-fungi planting and five years of experience working abroad, was appointed as the general manager of the Company by the CFRD and the Cooperative. The Cooperative was effectively the shareholder. The Company was affiliated with the Cooperative but financially independent. Based on the tripartite agreement, the total investment in the Company was 1.6 million yuan, of which 1.5 million yuan was a donation from the CFRD and the remaining 100,000 yuan was a required investment from the general manager. The CFRD limited the amount outsiders were allowed to invest, including the general manager, in order to protect the interests of the villagers, particularly the marginal ones.<sup>72</sup> Under this arrangement, neither the villagers nor the Cooperative, neither of whom had any experience or capacity to manage a successful edible-fungi planting business, would run the Company. However, the villagers, as large shareholders of the Cooperative, would receive most of the profits. Meanwhile, the general manager had an incentive to improve the performance of the Company as he would receive a share of the profits. According to the CFRD, this seemed an ideal way to delineate the roles and responsibilities of the Cooperative, the Company and the general manager.

Nonetheless, the local villagers had no confidence in the CFRD's business model. Many of them were suspicious of the general manager, an outsider who had to mortgage his own house to the Cooperative in order to raise the required investment in the Company. They had serious doubts as to whether he was using the business as a cover to embezzle the donation. Some villagers claimed that the manager could easily recoup his investment through kickbacks received while doing the Company's business. The villagers even argued that the more funds the general manager invested in the Company the better, which revealed their dissatisfaction with the CFRD's policy of limiting the general manager's investment to 100,000 yuan.

The local villagers' distrust of the manager crippled the CFRD's business model. The manager, who was supposed to oversee and direct the running of the Company, had to submit proposals for expenditures, on a case-by-case basis, to the local management team of the Cooperative. In practice, the Cooperative's board members rarely approved proposals submitted by the general manager because they were concerned about the security of the donation, over which they had *de facto* control. Although the manager tried to change this procedure, operational stagnation ensued, despite the CFRD's coordination.

The daily business of the Company was further undermined by some privileged villagers whose homesteads and farmland were leased for the construction of the Company. These villagers demanded jobs in the Company and even threatened to reclaim the land if they were fired. In this sense, their relationship with the Company was never simply one of employer and employees. Moreover, from

72 Lingohr 2007.

the villagers' perspective, all the investment in the Company came from the Cooperative, which was jointly owned by them. Therefore, the villagers claimed that the general manager was just an employee of the factory and that he should work for them rather than be a manager in charge of the Company. Consequently, absenteeism, evasion, desertion, pilfering and even verbal abuse directed at the general manager frequently occurred in the Company. As a result of the sharp contrast between the CFRD's knowledge system and the villagers' unique memories and interpretations of their community,<sup>73</sup> the future of the long-term livelihood improvement project was severely jeopardized.

### Setting Up a Model: the Piloting Project

In the above sections, we have demonstrated the main gaps that emerged at different stages of the post-earthquake recovery project. Although the CFRD claimed that local participation was encouraged, it seemed the villagers rarely had a say in project decision making. In fact, participation is often a process controlled and managed by development agencies.<sup>74</sup> The Happiness villagers were directed to understand the problems they faced and then mobilized and organized to participate in the development project designed by the CFRD. This led to an uncoordinated outcome as villagers and the CFRD adopted different strategies to fulfil their respective objectives. Furthermore, the CFRD encountered immense knowledge barriers when it became more involved in the community.<sup>75</sup> In these situations, it was easier to overcome the obstacles by seeking help from current or previous village cadres, retired officials and relatively knowledgeable representatives.<sup>76</sup> Yet, by involving local representatives, the CFRD became drawn into the village's internal conflicts.<sup>77</sup> The historical and socio-cultural context of this rural community further complicated the relationship between the locals and the outsiders.<sup>78</sup> From this perspective, the CFRD was not well prepared for the complex local conditions, and it also underestimated the importance of local knowledge.<sup>79</sup>

However, it is too simplistic to conclude that the CFRD's development project in Happiness Village was a failure. In fact, the CFRD never admitted that the project failed to achieve its goals, although its investment did not improve villagers' livelihoods. Since Wenchuan, the CFRD has carried out similar projects in rural communities located in areas affected by other natural disasters such as the Yushu earthquake 玉树地震 of 2010 and the Lushan earthquake 芦山地震 of 2013. Given its continuing involvement in post-disaster reconstruction and

73 Skinner 2007.

74 Vivian and Maseko 1994.

75 Gu, Zhang and Yang 2007.

76 Spires 2011b.

77 Ortner 1995.

78 Skinner 2011.

79 Scott 1998.

development, it is therefore important to not only understand the divergences between the CFRD and the villagers of Happiness Village but also to explore the underlying logic of rural development projects from the perspective of the CFRD.

Among the diverse goals of the CFRD's post-earthquake recovery projects, the most important one has been to explore new approaches to rural poverty alleviation and post-disaster reconstruction, and ideally establish a model of sustainable rural development that could be generalized and replicated in other rural communities in China. The CFRD concluded that:

To some extent, the post-earthquake reconstruction was an opportunity for diverse forces, including the government and NGOs, to explore, to experiment and to learn. NGOs in China, as well as the government, did not have adequate theoretical guidance or practical experience to conduct post-disaster recovery projects. Happiness Village was the first experiment site we (the CFRD) selected to implement a holistic rural community development project. We would become both the "pioneer" and "leader" of the NGO sector, if the experiment was successful. Happiness Village would be a demonstration of our experiment. The "Happiness Model" would be the standard for rural development projects. Organizations and individuals, whoever wants to participate in the work of post-disaster reconstruction and rural development in the future, will have to visit and learn from the "Happiness Model."<sup>80</sup>

An unsuccessful experiment along the way was considered a necessary risk and worth the cost in order to eventually meet this overarching objective. The deputy secretary-general of the CFRD stressed that risks and uncertainties were fundamental characteristics of the market economy. No one can guarantee to make a profit: a business is influenced by diverse factors beyond its control such as demand, price fluctuations, productivity and technology. The CFRD was prepared to bear the cost of an unsuccessful experiment, if a high return from the mission of rural poverty alleviation could be reasonably expected: "The mission of rural development cannot be completed in one day. We [the CFRD] came here [Happiness Village] for an experiment. It was not a disaster that even the experiment failed. We could select other villages to continue exploring the successful path towards poverty alleviation and rural development."<sup>81</sup>

In general, the objectives of the CFRD's rural development project in Happiness Village were not only to assist victims of the earthquake but also to formulate an innovative "model" for poverty alleviation. This model was to be applicable to rural areas across China, rather than an individual village. From this point of view, it is possible to see why the CFRD compromised on issues related to the farmhouse reconstruction but insisted on adopting a collective economy and establishing the Cooperative.

To put the CFRD's actions in a broader context, one can see that the organization was also constrained by the institutional principles and scant experience of Chinese NGOs,<sup>82</sup> which are undergoing a period of transformation as they

80 Internal document: *Project Report of the CFRD*.

81 Internal document: *Instruction Manual of Poverty Alleviation*, edited by the CFRD.

82 Yang 2005; Spiers 2011b; Hsu and Jiang 2015.



evolve from traditional charities to modern philanthropic organizations. Many NGOs emphasize the importance of local community empowerment and the principle of self-sustainability – “Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime” (*shou ren yi yu bu ru shou ren yi yu* 授人以鱼不如授人以渔). In light of this principle, an NGO cannot simply give money to target groups; the traditional method of charitable giving must be replaced and improved upon with professional empowerment projects. Sustainable livelihoods should be attainable even after the NGOs leave the project sites. Meanwhile, the lack of theoretical guidance and successful empirical projects means there is no sector leader among the modern NGOs, and thus there is a strong incentive for each NGO to experiment.<sup>83</sup> It can be seen that the gulf that existed between the CFRD and the villagers sprang from their divergent values. As modern Chinese NGOs evolve towards “value-driven organizations,”<sup>84</sup> their projects and activities are often directed and shaped by a given set of organizational values that often fail to line up with, and at times even conflict with, the pragmatic concerns of the local community they are trying to serve.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

This anthropological research explores the previously understudied relations between peasants and NGOs in the specific context of post-earthquake recovery. It identifies three main gaps which emerged during the operation of a recovery project. The first gap emanated from the conflict between the villagers’ concerns for their immediate living conditions and the NGO’s aspirations for the long-term development of the community. The second gap was between the villagers’ pragmatic needs and the NGO’s ambitions to align the farmhouse reconstruction with the BNSC campaign. The third gap was created by the villagers’ distrust and antipathy towards the collective economy and the NGO’s intention to use the collective economy to improve local livelihoods. We also point out that the unsatisfactory outcome of the project was not simply considered a failure from the perspective of the NGO. It was deemed a worthy experiment, given the relatively modest financial costs. The experience had, and still may have, the potential to inform future rural development projects which will shape the NGO’s transition towards a modern philanthropic organization.

In this paper, we do not intend to romanticize either NGOs or peasants by focusing on the benign intentions of NGOs to help vulnerable groups or the widely perceived weak position of peasants. Rather, we argue that more emphasis should be placed on identifying and bridging the gaps between two different groups of actors who have their own aspirations and interests. The logic of

83 Hsu and Jiang 2015.

84 Chen, Lune and Queen 2013, 870

85 Knutsen 2013.

their behaviour should be unpacked and examined in a more rational way. This would allow for a more in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the interactions between NGOs and peasants and a deeper exploration of the “real world” of NGOs and rural development in China.

### Biographical notes

Qing Liu is a PhD candidate in the department of sociology, The University of Hong Kong. His research interests include anthropology of development, rural studies and post-disaster recovery.

Raymond Yu Wang is an associate professor in the Center for Chinese Public Administration Research, the School of Government, Sun Yat-sen University. His research interests include water governance, NGOs and environmental politics in China.

Heping Dang is a lecturer in the School of Humanities and Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen. Her research interests include contemporary Chinese politics, social policy and law.

**摘要:** 当前对中国非政府组织 (NGO) 的研究大多聚焦于 NGO 与国家之间的关系, 而忽略了对 NGO 与目标群体两者间关系的研究。本文采用人类学的方法, 通过对汶川地震灾区一个灾后重建及农村发展项目的探讨, 试图弥补这一缺失。研究发现 NGO 开展的项目与在地农民的实际需求存在三类主要冲突。第一, NGO 往往关注于农村社区的长远发展而忽视了农民短期的、最为迫切的需求; 第二, NGO 通常将项目的开展与既有政府政策 (如社会主义新农村建设) 相结合, 却与农民的现实考量相冲突; 第三, NGO 提倡通过发展集体经济以促进农村地区的共同富裕, 却忽略了集体经济在农村的失败经历和农民发展私有经济的诉求。本研究进一步表明, 当今中国 NGO 正经历由传统慈善组织向现代公益组织的转型过程, 其项目的开展必然受到行业理念与价值观的约束。鉴于此, 即便 NGO 能意识到这些冲突的存在, 也并不会轻易否定项目成果或为满足目标群体的需求而妥协。

**关键词:** 非政府组织; 农民与非政府组织关系; 灾后重建; 农村发展; 汶川地震

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