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LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF “QUALITY OF LIFE” IN RURAL CHINA

Implications for Anthropology and Participatory Development

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One of the main challenges faced by anthropologists and practitioners who work in international development is the identification of locally appropriate objectives and outcomes for development projects. In recent years, improving the quality of life of target populations has emerged as a key objective of many development agencies, but there is little consensus about how best to define and operationalize this concept. This paper applies anthropological research methods to understand a local population’s definitions of quality of life in one rapidly developing township in rural Sichuan, China. The paper also examines the patterning of attitudes about quality of life across occupational groups in the study community. Data are drawn from ethnographic interviews and quantitative surveys. Findings suggest that villagers’ definitions of quality of life consist of a range of themes related to both material living standards and subjective measures. Occupational groups differ markedly in their quality-of-life ratings, a pattern that is in line with the widening economic disparities in rural communities throughout China as the nation’s economy undergoes liberal economic reforms. Implications for anthropological theory and practice, and for the practice of participatory development, are also discussed.

THE FIELD OF DEVELOPMENT ANTHROPOLOGY, one of the discipline’s key areas of practice both inside and outside the academy, is replete with examples of well-intentioned development projects that result in financial waste, inept management, and negative impacts on local communities (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994; Moss 2005; Nolan 2002; Scott 1998). One of the most difficult problems in this field is the identification of locally appropriate objectives and outcomes for development projects.

Governmental agencies, multilateral donors, and nongovernmental organizations working in international development often describe the goal of their programs as improving the “quality of life” (QOL) of their target populations. The United Nations Development Program, for example, uses a Human Development Index, which includes a measure of economic productivity, life expectancy, and education to identify development needs and gauge the effectiveness of development interventions that are designed to increase quality
of life (United Nations Development Program 2007). But to what extent do these macro-level indicators truly address the primary concerns of local people who are the “targets” of development efforts?

In a recent article published in this journal, Campbell (2008) reported the results of an ethnographic analysis of development programs in Kenya and argued that there is a dire need for anthropologists to provide community-level insight into development programs. Such programs often base their objectives and methods solely on policy texts and lack a nuanced understanding of the ethnographic context within which policies are actually implemented. Similarly, one anthropologist with fifteen years of experience working on an agroforestry development project in the Philippines found that the establishment of appropriate development goals is one of the most fundamental problems facing any development practitioner (Wallace 2009:58).

Even if scholars and development practitioners agree that the use of locally salient, culturally sensitive, and site-specific indicators of development is important, how should such indicators be formulated? My aims in this paper are threefold. First, I wish to use data from semi-structured interviews to help define the specific components of quality of life that are most salient to people in one rapidly developing township in China’s mountainous southwestern province of Sichuan. The case of rural China affords a unique opportunity to examine development in a dynamic context marked by rapid economic growth, far-reaching changes in state policies, and widening inequality.

Second, I wish to use the results of a quantitative survey to examine how attitudes about quality of life differ across occupational groups. Occupation is considered as a key variable because recent economic reforms in rural China, driven by changes in national policy, have dramatically altered the occupational structure of rural communities, as will be described in detail below. Different groups within communities often perceive economic development and quality of life in disparate ways based on their position in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Understanding local attitudes about quality of life can help facilitate development strategies that address the most important concerns for the target population, enhancing the long-term sustainability of development interventions.

Finally, I wish to reflect on how this approach can be undertaken early in the process of planning and implementing development projects in order to enhance their efficacy and promote public participation. “Participatory development” has been a buzzword in the development arena for several decades. While a significant cadre of critical social scientists view “participation” as yet another guise for enlisting local communities in the corrupt business of development (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Moss 2005; Rahman 1995), the fact remains that governments, multilateral and bilateral agencies, and nongovernmental organizations spend billions of dollars on development projects annually, and the outcomes of this huge commitment of resources can be greatly improved by engaging with local communities. Anthropologists, with their tradition of community-based research, are well positioned to make an important contribution in this regard. The community case presented here is not meant to be representative of rural China as a whole, since cultural and socioeconomic conditions vary tremendously from place to place; rather, it affords us a close look at the processes of economic development and community members’ views about how these processes affect their lives.

**PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT**

Participatory development, which can be defined as an approach that makes people “central to development by encouraging beneficiary involvement in interventions that affect them and over which they previously had limited control and influence” (Cooke and Kothari 2001:5), has been an aim of multilateral development agencies since the early 1980s. The United Nations Development Program acknowledges the importance of public participation in its Millennium Development Goals, as does the World Bank, which has published its own guidelines for conducting participatory development programs. The latest term for this in the World Bank is Community-Driven Development (CDD), which regards people as “assets and partners in the development process” and gives “control of decisions and resources to community groups and local governments” (World Bank 2005).

Over the past two decades, participatory development has been transformed in at least two fundamental and significant ways. First, the idea has moved from a set of concrete steps to a more general, abstract attitude of engaging stakeholders and building social capacity. Indeed, many key development agencies see the promotion of “social capital,” “civil society,” or even “empowerment”—all of which were once seen as stepping stones toward more concrete development outcomes, such as improved nutritional status or more sustainable land-use practices—as laudable goals in their own right. Second, the idea of participatory development has been scaled up: where the “community” was once the important level of analysis, broader participation in governance and institutional decision-making are now seen as tenets of the participatory framework.

The idea of participatory development is not without its critics. A good rubric for thinking about the contradictions and limitations of this approach is provided by Hickey and Mohan (2004), who argue that participatory development has the potential for both “tyranny” and “transformation.” On the tyranny side, when participatory development involves people from historically marginalized racial, ethnic, or gender groups, it has the potential to exacerbate inequality just like top-down programs (Mayoux 2001). Development practitioners and government officials sometimes see participation as a technical method to be achieved through a series of steps; this focus on the technical side of the approach tends to depoliticize development and overlook the power dynamics of local social systems. This is a critical mistake, since understanding how key groups (ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, etc.) are positioned relative to one another is crucial to enacting responsible development interventions (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Hickey and Mohan 2004). As the anthropologist Riall Nolan (2002:162) points out, “how people participate is fundamentally a question of how much power they have to determine the shape and operation of the project.”
THE CONTEXT OF DEVELOPMENT:
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

The People's Republic of China has pursued a strategy of rapid economic development since its founding in 1949. In the early years, China followed the Soviet model of development, with industrial production in the hands of the central government and agricultural production controlled by a network of rural collectives. With the death of Mao Zedong and the ascendance of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, Chinese leaders began a series of liberal reform policies known collectively as "Reform and Opening," which ushered in sweeping social and economic change. These reforms have drastically altered the lives and livelihoods of one-fifth of humanity (more than 1.3 billion people), as the nation has seen a return to smallholder agriculture under the Household Responsibility System, the privatization of industry, greater integration into the global economy, and the rise of an urban consumer class. China's gross domestic product has grown nearly 10% annually over the past thirty years. Its economy is expected to be the largest in the world, surpassing the United States, in the next two decades (Tilt and Young 2007).

In the midst of this rapid growth, improving quality of life has emerged as a central development goal for Chinese government officials and economic planners. This goal is often couched in the language of creating xiaokang (which translates literally as "small comfort") for the citizenry, a historical ideal with roots in the ancient Warring States period (475–221 BC). The concept has been revived as a modern development goal by leading members of the Chinese Communist Party, including former President Jiang Zemin and current President Hu Jintao (Chuang 2002). This creates a paradox for the central government, since the Reform and Opening policies, which have fueled China's meteoric rise on the world stage, have also rolled back social services for the nation's citizens. Furthermore, the distribution of the social and economic benefits of development have been highly uneven. China's vast interior, with less-developed markets and comparatively little access to foreign capital, is falling further behind the more prosperous eastern coastal regions (Wang and Hu 1999). Inequality between individuals, communities, and regions is on the rise and constitutes one of the most pressing social problems in reform-era China (Riskin et al. 2001).

This sets the stage for some particularly complicated problems in regards to economic development in China. The Chinese government is increasingly allowing foreign development intervention by multilateral agencies (including the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program) and private agencies (including the Ford Foundation and the Nature Conservancy). The government also continues its legacy of state-led development to a certain extent, allocating central funding to poor, rural areas via the "model village" program and the "new socialist village" program, both of which provide subsidies to rural communities for infrastructural improvements and other development tasks. Many of these interventions, while well-intentioned, apply generalized models of development that often fail to understand the economic, political, and cultural context of local communities. In many cases, development interventions rely on local government cadres to identify development needs and allocate development funding. In short, scholars and policymakers know relatively little about the lived experiences and worldviews of the people who are the "targets" of development interventions in rural China (Tilt and Young 2007). As a result, there is a notable lack of information about how villagers perceive the economic changes taking place around them, and how they prioritize the kinds of development projects they would like to see. This is an obstacle that will have to be overcome if development practitioners are to shape socially responsible development practices.

THE STUDY SITE

Futian, the site of this study, is a township of approximately 4,100 people located on the western edge of Panzhihua Municipality, in China's mountainous southwestern province of Sichuan (Figure 1). The southwestern region has been the ethnic, cultural, and economic frontier of China for many centuries; it is here that the nation's development challenges can be seen in greatest relief. Along with the neighboring provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou, Sichuan is one of the most ethnically heterogeneous regions of China, with more than a dozen of the nation's 55 recognized "minority nationalities," or shao shu minzu (Chinese Statistical Bureau 2005:44). Futian township's population is quite ethnically diverse; its largest minority consists of a group who call themselves Shuitian, and whom the central government classifies as a branch of the Yi minority nationality, a group that includes speakers of several dialects in the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of languages.

Despite the adage, common throughout the southwest region, that one must "remove a wheelbarrow full of rocks just to grow a mouthful of rice," agricultural

Figure 1. Map of study area: Futian Township, Panzhihua Municipality, Sichuan, China.
yields in Futian are generally sufficient to feed the local population and to sell excess grain, vegetables, and meat as far away as Panzhihua, although many older residents recall poverty so acute during the Maoist period that people ate forage grass along with their animals on occasion simply to survive. Most households hold between one and five mu of land, typically consisting of both irrigated rice paddy and dry fields for planting crops that can be irrigated by carrying water from the local stream. The average household income in the township was 3,637 yuan in 2004, slightly above the provincial average and well below the national average. The Engel’s coefficient, which is a measure of the percentage of household income spent on food, and a good proxy measure for poverty, was 55.6% during the same time period (Sichuan Statistical Bureau 2005:175). One key informant in this study aptly summed up the standard of living in the township as “neither rich nor poor” (bu qiang, er bu fu).

An issue of key importance for this study is that changes in national development policies have dramatically altered the occupational structure of Futian in recent years. During the 1980s and 1990s, the township supported several collectively owned factories, called “township and village enterprises,” including several zinc smelters, a coking plant, and a coal-washing plant. These factories helped to absorb rural surplus labor and promote local development through the generation of tax revenues (Naughton 1995; Whiting 2000). In Futian, industrial revenues were used for such community development programs as the construction of new primary schools, government offices, and inter-village roads. Although only a small fraction of local households relied directly on industry for their livelihoods, the benefits of industrialization accrued to the community as a whole.

By the late 1990s, however, local factories were privatized in an effort to increase efficiency, a common trend throughout rural China during the reform period. This allowed the township government to sell collectively held industrial assets to private investors, who subsequently controlled the direction of local industrial development and profited from industrial activity (Tilt and Xiao 2007). Futian’s zinc smelter, coking plant, and coal-washing plant were all purchased by private investors from outside the community, most of whom had operated small-scale factories in other parts of the province or in neighboring provinces. Most crucial for this study, the investors laid off the local factory workforce and hired skilled workers with prior experience in other factories under their management. As a consequence, the privatization of local industry was compounded by the outsourcing of wage-labor opportunities.

As a result of these political and economic changes, the township economy currently consists of three main occupational groups: industrial workers, commercial and service sector workers, and farmers. Industrial workers labor in one of Futian’s three remaining factories and earn a monthly wage. Commercial and service sector workers sell goods in local retail shops or provide services such as basic health care or agricultural extension. Farmers participate in a smallholder agricultural system and cultivate a variety of crops—including rice, sweet potatoes, beans, peas, and melons—but for subsistence and to sell in local and regional markets. This three-tiered occupational structure provides an ideal setting to study how different groups of people, who are situated differently in relation to the political economy of development, perceive their quality of life, which is a key development goal for the Chinese central government and for multilateral development agencies. Where have development strategies been successful, and where do they need improvement? How do people in the community define locally salient markers of quality of life? Do community members share a common perception of quality of life? Are there significant variations in perceptions of quality of life by people belonging to different occupational groups? If significant variation exists, how can it be explained?

**METHODS AND SAMPLING**

**Phase One: Defining “Quality of Life” from a Local Perspective**

Data collection methods for this study included semi-structured interviews and a standardized, quantitative survey instrument, supported by participant observation in the study community over a period of six months in 2003, with a follow-up field visit in 2006. The research was undertaken in two phases. Phase One involved defining “quality of life” from an emic perspective. First, a stratified random sample of 36 participants was drawn from among the three primary occupational groups in Futian—industrial workers, commercial and service sector workers, and farmers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants in Mandarin Chinese on a broad range of issues, including household demographics, economic development, livelihood strategies, income, and quality of life. Interviews ranged in length from a half hour to more than two hours; a typical interview lasted one hour.

As part of the interview, study participants were asked to list terms and concepts in response to the question, “What does quality of life mean to you? What elements are included in this term?” Extensive notes of each interview were taken by the researcher, with the aid of a Chinese research assistant when necessary. These interview transcripts served as the textual basis for analysis. The interview transcripts were open-coded using the N6 qualitative analytical software (QSR International), a process by which data are analyzed line by line. In total, more than 25 concepts were provided by study participants (Table 1).

**Phase Two: Eliciting Quality-of-Life Ratings**

The second phase of this study, which employed a standardized survey questionnaire, was designed in part to examine whether participants from different occupational groups in the township shared a common perception of quality of life. A new sample of 146 was recruited to participate in the survey. Occupation was again used as the primary sampling criterion. Twenty-four participants either chose not to participate or only completed part of the survey, for an overall sample of 122 and a response rate of 83.6%. The survey was translated into Chinese with the help of colleagues from Sichuan University and administered with the help of four undergraduate research assistants and one doctoral student from that institution.

One part of the survey was designed to elicit quality-of-life ratings from study participants. After a review of the list of terms and concepts related to “quality of life” from the semi-structured interviews, nine themes with high salience across
TABLE 1. All themes listed by participants in response to the question, "What does quality of life mean to you?"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Benefiting from Reform and Opening policies</td>
<td>Living an exciting, fast-paced lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attaining &quot;small comfort&quot; (xiaokang)</td>
<td>Catching up with an urban standard of living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having sufficient cash income</td>
<td>Overcoming cultural and economic &quot;backwardness&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfying basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter</td>
<td>Having a large plot of land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefiting from industrial development</td>
<td>Having autonomy over crop choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having access to recreational activities</td>
<td>Having transportation within the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having good interpersonal relationships</td>
<td>Having good transportation beyond the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with family and friends</td>
<td>Being able to count on social benefits from the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being physically healthy</td>
<td>Having access to basic medical care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being happy and fulfilled</td>
<td>Having more stock animals (water buffalo, goats, donkeys)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of consumer goods</td>
<td>Feeling that things are getting better, not worse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating meat more frequently</td>
<td>Narrowing the gap between rich and poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having labor-saving amenities,</td>
<td>Having free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>such as washing machines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having access to media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having access to secondary schools</td>
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Participant groups were selected and used to construct this portion of the survey. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale with a set of nine statements, each representing one of the quality-of-life themes. Rating tasks produce ordinal data, enabling the researcher to compare ratings across individuals and groups using a variety of statistical tools (Bernard 2006; Ross 2004:105-7).

DEFINING "QUALITY OF LIFE" IN RURAL CHINA

The nine most salient themes regarding quality of life for participants across occupational groups are shown in Table 2 and discussed in detail below.

Benefiting from "Reform and Opening" Policies

Most participants in the sample listed benefiting from Reform and Opening policies as a salient part of quality of life in the township. These policies were initiated during the plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978 and have radically changed social and economic life in China. In Futian, most farming households associate the reform policies with the dismantling of the rural collectives and the return of smallholder agriculture under the Household Responsibility System. Under this system, peasants are free to make crop selection decisions and sell crops on the market for profit, after meeting basic grain procurement requirements set by the state (Oi 1999). This reversal of the socialist farming system which existed under Mao Zedong has afforded farmers a great deal of autonomy over their livelihoods, as one farmer noted:

"It's much better than before. Ten times better. Before [reform], we never had enough to eat. We had to grow rice, because that's what the government told us to grow. We couldn't eat other things, like corn. Also, there was never enough meat to eat. One family of seven or eight people could only slaughter one pig per year, so we ate very little meat. Now, we grow what we want and we can just about eat as much meat as we want. We can grow things that bring in cash, too, like bananas and mangoes.

As China's agricultural economy continues to liberalize under the reform policies, farmers in Futian are opting to cultivate less grain and other subsistence crops and focus instead on producing commodity crops such as mangoes, melons, and other fruits, which can be sold in local and regional markets (Tilt 2008). For the first time, there are now a number of households in Futian whose economic viability is based solely on the market. These households plant their fields entirely with commodity crops for sale in the regional market, using cash profits to purchase rice and other food items for household consumption. Farmers tended to be grateful for the cash income and increased autonomy such policies provided them.

Attaining "Small Comfort" (Xiaokang)

A central development goal for China's current leadership is to provide "small comfort" (xiaokang) for the citizenry. Xiaokang is a historical concept which first appeared in the "Record of Rites" from China's Warring States period (475-221 BC). This historical text describes an idyllic age of "great equality" (dutong) in which heaven and man were in harmony and wealth was distributed evenly. But "great equality," according to the text, is an unattainable goal because of humankind's tendency to acquire material wealth for personal gain. The alternative to equality is "small comfort," a state in which individuals seek their own pecuniary benefit.

The concept has been revived as a modern development goal by leading members of the Chinese Communist Party, including current President Hu Jintao.
and Premier Wen Jiabao. In principle, this entails the establishment of a middle
class of secure, comfortable consumers, but in practice there is little agreement
in the study community about what exactly constitutes "small comfort." Most
participants felt that income and housing conditions were key components of
small comfort, and many felt that Futian and other areas in China's vast interior
region were falling further behind the prosperous east coast, which has become
a global manufacturing hub. This pattern of uneven development was in fact a
cornerstone of Chinese Communist Party policy; in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping
justified the establishment of Special Economic Zones in eastern coastal cities by
saying that, in the midst of market reforms, "some must get rich first."

One study participant reflected on the meager living afforded him by
agriculture: "Agriculture is only good to a certain point. It solves the wengbao
problem, but it doesn't make you well-off." *Wengbao*, which literally means
"warmth and fullness," is how many rural Chinese describe the standard of living
just above poverty, when the most basic material needs of food and shelter have
been satisfied. By contrast, attaining a small-comfort level of development seemed
quite remote to most villagers; one worker in the coking plant even remarked that
"xiao kang is just a word invented by the government. It doesn't mean anything;
they just say it because it sounds good."

**Having Sufficient Cash Income**

On a related note, China's reform policies have effectively dismantled the
system of social benefits that existed during the socialist collective period. Many
study participants maintained that, while their economic lives were measurably
better than before, they had to rely on themselves now, since the government no
longer supported them by providing them with work points or pensions. Earning
a cash income is essential to having a decent quality of life in reform-era China.
Investment in children's education is generally the largest cash expenditure for
local households, as one participant, a shopkeeper in the commercial and service
sector, remarked:

> We make 300 or 400 yuan per month. This is barely enough to support
ourselves. If you want to go to junior middle school [sixth through eighth
grade], you have to go to Renhe [the district town]. A lot of children don't
go to school at all, either because their families don't have the money, or
because they want them to work on the farm.

The township has four primary schools, but families who wish to provide
a middle-school and high-school education for their children must send them to
the district town of Renhe, where they pay room and board as well as tuition.
Agricultural households face particular challenges in this regard, since their
small land holdings, which average only 3.1 mu (approximately 0.5 acres), often
produce meager yields that leave little excess after household consumption needs
are met. By contrast, industrial workers may earn up to 1,000 yuan per month and
thus have considerably more discretionary income. One elderly farmer told me
with obvious pride, "My son is not a farmer like me. He worked hard in several

**Satisfying Basic Needs**

Many study participants felt that the most basic of human needs must be
met before other development goals can be considered. Participants nearly always
spoke of a triad of needs: *chi* (food to eat), *chuan* (clothes to wear), and *zhu* (a
house to live in). Basic living conditions in the township have changed rapidly
over the past two decades. Residents older than forty often related tales of hardship
in which their families survived on the season's rice crop and little else. During
especially hard times under the collective system, many peasant households ate
forage grass along with their stock animals; some villagers sardonically referred
to the collective period as "the era of green shit" (*lubian shi hua*).

In general, however, Futian has seen great improvement in basic living
conditions. In the central part of the township, many old-style adobe houses are
being replaced by multistory cement houses with tiled facades and corrugated
roofs. Such houses cost as much as 20,000 yuan, not including the expenses
required to decorate them and fill them with consumer goods such as television
sets and refrigerators, which mark a household as financially well-off. As the
township becomes more integrated within the regional economy, the variety,
quality, and availability of food has increased.

**Benefiting from Industrial Development**

Benefiting from industrial development was another widely cited theme,
and one that requires an explication of China's peculiar path to industrialization.
Beginning in the early 1980s, central economic planners concerned with rising
surplus labor in the countryside initiated policies that encouraged the expansion
of industrial production in rural areas by exhorting peasants to "leave the land,
but not the countryside" (*li tu, bu li xiang*). These so-called "township and village
enterprises," which number in the millions nationwide, became a mainstay of
China's rapidly growing rural economy and an important source of employment
and fiscal revenue for local governments (China Township and Village Enterprise
Yearbook Editorial Committee 2004). In Futian, many of the local factories were
geared toward providing industrial inputs to Panzhihua Iron and Steel, the nation's
third-largest state-owned steel smelting plant. In line with a general trend in China
toward market-driven economic policies, Futian's factories were all privatized
during the early 2000s. A retired government cadre described the changing role of
industry in the following manner:
Things were better before. In 1990, when I finished my term as township mayor, we had 17 or 18 township and village enterprises. And they were genuine township and village enterprises, owned by the local government. These included four coking plants, a construction company, a gas station, a primary zinc smelter, and quite a few secondary zinc smelters. All this started around 1984. But the government started selling them off in 1997, and now they have all been privatized. Most of the private investors are outsiders.

Many study participants, particularly long-term residents, remarked that the benefit structure of industrial development had changed markedly in recent years. Whereas township and village enterprises had previously employed a primarily local labor force and contributed crucial revenue to township development projects and infrastructure, they were now managed by outside entrepreneurs with no long-term obligations to township well-being. This will be discussed in further detail below.

Having Access to Recreational Opportunities

Many participants felt that access to recreational activities was an important aspect of quality of life. Young people tended to be especially eager for amenities such as karaoke, billiards, and mahjong parlors, all of which are in short supply in the township. Watching television is an increasingly popular pastime; within the past few years, satellite dishes have sprouted around the township as prolifically as mushrooms after a rainstorm. One participant, a 78-year-old Shitian woman, insisted on posing for a photograph in front of her family's newly installed satellite dish. When I remarked during an interview about how strange it seemed that someone who lived in a three-room house with mud walls and few possessions should choose to spend her discretionary income this way, she replied, "I like to watch Beijing opera." Despite limited discretionary income, it is increasingly common for households in all occupational groups to own television sets and satellite dishes.

Having Good Interpersonal Relationships

The ideal family type in dynastic China was described as si shi tong tang, which literally means "four generations under one roof." The Chinese family has largely been understood by scholars as a corporate structure that provides for the economic welfare of its members, ensures orderly inheritance of property, and maintains a hierarchical social order. Equally important, however, the Chinese family also functions as an emotive unit (Yan 2003) in which members share in the "red and white occasions" (tong hai xi shi), red symbolizing happy affairs such as birthdays and weddings, and white symbolizing solemn occasions such as funerary rites and ancestor veneration.

In Futian, the nature of interpersonal relationships, both at the level of the family and at the level of the community, has undergone significant change in recent years. Within the family, patrilocality is no longer the norm for many newly married couples, many of whom wish to establish their own residences in the township center and forgo farming in favor of working in retail or service jobs. At the wider community level, out-migration in search of labor opportunities is increasingly common. In Futian, it was common to hear of relatives who had gone to the city, or even outside the province, to work in a factory or in the construction or tourism industry. This trend allowed family members in the township to benefit from remittances, but it also resulted in some unanticipated effects, such as difficulties taking care of elders and a breakdown of social relations in the township.

Being Physically Healthy

Many participants felt that proper physical health was a key element of high quality of life. The agricultural livelihood in Sichuan is extremely physically demanding. Wet-rice cultivation, which occupies farming households between the spring and autumn equinoxes (chunfen and qiufen, respectively), entails turning over the soil, leveling and flooding the paddy, maintaining paddy terraces, cultivating juvenile rice shoots in the germination nursery, transplanting shoots into the fields, weeding, monitoring irrigation, and harvesting and threshing the grain. Mechanization is impractical in this mountainous region of Sichuan, where land plots are small, rocky, and steeply graded. Intensive hands-on labor is the norm, and thus farming takes a heavy toll on many villagers' bodies.

Futian's industrial factories present an additional threat to the physical health of villagers, many of whom felt that air and water quality had deteriorated considerably owing to industrial pollution (Tilt 2006). The zinc smelter was a focus of concern for many participants, since toxic metals such as arsenic, lead, and mercury are common by-products of metal smelting and can follow multiple exposure pathways into the body via respiratory air, drinking water, or food grown in contaminated soil. Some villagers felt that pollution resulted in cumulative health effects that ultimately compromised the longevity (changshou) of township residents. "People don't live as long as they used to," was a common refrain. Longevity remains an important cultural value in rural China, where elders typically live in joint families and enjoy considerable respect. Although participant views in the township varied widely about the severity of the health risks posed by pollution, Futian is typical of many rural communities in reform-era China that must balance the economic gains of industry against seemingly intractable environmental problems.

Being Happy and Fulfilled

Finally, many participants cited happiness (xinfu), mental health (xinli jiankang), and fulfillment (manny) as important elements of quality of life. These subjective concepts centered around enjoying the fruits of one's labors and having a sense of purpose in life.

COMPARING THE VIEWS OF DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

One of the aims of this study was to determine whether participants from different occupational groups rated their quality of life in similar ways. As described above, participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 =
The occupational groups show some disparate response patterns. Because the dependent variable (responses to the Likert scale questions) was discrete rather than continuous, it was treated as an ordinal variable in the analysis. The Kruskal-Wallis test, a simple nonparametric statistical procedure, was used to compare participant responses across occupational groups. Analagous to the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the Kruskal-Wallis test is a better fit for ordinal data and does not require a normal distribution. It works by calculating the mean ranks for each group based on the sum of their responses to the Likert scale questions and then comparing these mean ranks. Follow-up analyses using the Mann-Whitney U-test were also conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the three occupational groups (Freund and Simon 1997; Green et al. 2000). This method allows us to assess whether the three occupational groups showed significantly different levels of agreement on the statements related to quality of life. Insights gained from semi-structured interviews and participant observation help to provide a framework for interpreting these differences.

In general, farmers consistently showed the lowest level of agreement with all of the statements about quality of life in the township. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test showed statistically significant differences between occupational groups in terms of how they viewed two themes: Theme 2, “Small Comfort” (xiaokang); and Theme 5, Industrial Development. The results are shown in Table 3. For Theme 2, commercial and service sector workers, who enjoy higher cash incomes, tended to view themselves as having reached this development goal, while farmers did not. This is in line with many farmers’ feelings, expressed in the semi-structured interviews, that the Reform and Opening policies were disproportionately benefiting wage-earners in the township while the farmers are being marginalized. Socioeconomic data from the survey used in this study indicate that commercial/service sector workers earned, on average, 800–1,000 yuan per month, approximately double the monthly income of farming households, which averaged 430 yuan. Perhaps more importantly, commercial and service sector workers tended to live in the center of the township, which residents referred to as the “open district” (kaifeng), where housing conditions were more modern and access to infrastructure such as piped water and sewer service was more routine. By contrast, most farmers lived in one of four villages throughout the township, in houses with adobe walls and with limited access to basic amenities.

Industrial workers’ level of agreement with Theme 2, “Small Comfort,” was situated between that of commercial/service workers and farmers. As noted above, the precise meaning of xiaokang (“small comfort”) is difficult to pin down, but it generally includes perceptions about income, housing conditions, and general living standards. From a financial standpoint, industrial workers’ monthly wages averaged more than 1,000 yuan, higher than both of the other occupation groups. Their perceptions of xiaokang were likely influenced by the fact that, despite their incomes, they lived in temporary shanty houses constructed of scavenged materials within the industrial compound of the township. As migrant laborers, they occupied a tenuous position within the local economy and had no secure access to local farmland, which is a primary means of buffering a household against economic risk in rural China.

The occupational groups also differed significantly in terms of how they viewed Theme 5, Industrial Development. Not surprisingly, industrial workers agreed most strongly with the statement, “I feel that I benefit from local industrial development,” whereas the other groups’ responses were much more moderate. Industrial workers’ responses were statistically different from the other two groups’ responses at the p < 0.05 level of significance. These differences stem from the liberal economic reforms taking place throughout China today. In the 1990s, revenue poured in from Futian’s township and village factories, all of which were still collectively held by the township government. Cadres referred to local factories as their “meal ticket” (chifan caizheng), since they took in more than 2 million yuan annually in taxes and profits, which they used to construct a six-story government office building, pave the main thoroughway from Panzhihua city, build two new schools for the poorest and most remote of Futian’s four villages, and invest in new agricultural technology. The vice mayor of the township once boasted to me in an interview about the government’s success in providing the villagers with the “three connections” (san tong) essential to rural life: roads, water, and electrical power. By the end of the 1990s, every household...
in Futian could truck its crops to market on reasonably well maintained roads, drink well water or water pumped from a government-subsidized groundwater system, and chat with friends and family into the evening beneath electric lights. These constituted the very tangible gains in living standards made possible by industrial development.

In recent years, however, local factories have privatized in an effort to increase efficiency, a process which other scholars have described as the “dismantling of communal capital” (Muldavin 1996). This transformation in the ownership structure of rural factories, supported by national policy changes that allowed for greater private ownership, enabled township cadres to sell collectively held industrial assets to private investors, who subsequently controlled the direction of local industrial development and profited from industrial activity. All of Futian’s factories were privatized. Since most local residents lacked the capital to invest in them, the factories were sold to private investors from the provincial capital of Chengdu or from neighboring provinces. In most cases, investors replaced local workers with workers who had prior experience in factories under their management, or with members of their extended kinship networks. As a result, inequality was further exacerbated within the township.

Many farmers and commercial/service sector workers used the colloquial, mildly derogatory term waidiren (“outsiders”) to refer to the migrant laborers. As one farmer noted, “It [factory privatization] has brought a lot of waidiren into the community to invest and work in industry, but we don’t get any of the benefits from industrial development.” Although China’s liberal reform policies have had a universally positive impact on households in the township, they have clearly benefited some more than others. This pattern of uneven development is reflected both in farmers’ lower material living standards and in their lower levels of agreement with the quality-of-life statements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT

What kinds of broader lessons might be drawn from this case, and what are the implications for participatory development? Most major development agencies recognize the importance of participatory development, and many even have their own guidelines for conducting it. As recent experience has shown, however, the devil is in the details: the question of exactly how to promote public participation, and with whom, is one that is subject to the effects of politics and power (Cooke and Kohra 2001; Moss 2005). As noted above, participatory development has the potential for both “tyranny” and “transformation,” if undertaken in uncritical ways (Hickey and Mohan 2004). Here I would like to reflect briefly on how the findings of this study can contribute to the debate. My suggestions are threefold.

First, development interventions should begin with a qualitative assessment of needs. One aspect of this, as I have outlined in this paper, might be the identification and operationalization of key objectives, such as improving “quality of life.” This entails making an effort to get community input during the planning stages of a given project, not simply working for community “buy-in” once a project has already been decided upon. One established approach for conducting a needs assessment is the interdisciplinary Rapid Assessment Process (RAP), which Beebe (2005:283–86) defines as “intensive team-based qualitative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis, and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider’s perspective.”

Second, researchers and development practitioners should be wary of viewing communities as homogenous entities. As this case has shown, different groups within communities can have drastically different perceptions and attitudes about the current state of their lives, and about the direction that community development should proceed. I have focused the analysis in this paper on occupational groups, but intracommunity variation will of course be different in different locations and circumstances and may require an analysis of the community along gender, religious, ethnic or socioeconomic lines. A variety of research methods can be used to ensure that intracommunity variation in views is captured and integrated into project planning and implementation.

Third, although the approach I have outlined in this paper can be undertaken early in the development process, it can also be used as part of project monitoring and evaluation to see whether community members feel that important targets are being met. Researchers and practitioners can use the results of such monitoring as a guide to adjust project protocols along the way. Such a participatory approach is admittedly somewhat difficult to undertake in a place like China, where there is little cultural or political support for development models that deviate from a top-down design. For example, a recent report from an anthropologist working in China on a World Bank–funded project found considerable resistance to participatory approaches among local government cadres, who saw such approaches as a nuisance at best and as a potential threat to their own authority and autonomy at worst (Guldin and Dennis 2007). However, there is evidence to suggest that this trend is changing. Nongovernmental organizations in particular, such as Heifer International and the Ford Foundation, have begun using participatory approaches in their work to identify community needs and to gauge where interventions will have the greatest impact (Yang Zhang, project coordinator for Heifer International for Sichuan, China, personal communication, 27 July 2009). Participatory approaches are likely to gain further traction in China, which means that practitioners will need to think carefully about how to design and implement such approaches.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the use of semi-structured interviews and a quantitative survey questionnaire, this article has examined locally salient indicators of quality of life in rural southwest China and assessed the patterning of attitudes about quality of life across occupational groups. Participants in the study felt that “quality of life” consisted of a range of themes related to both material living standards and subjective measures such as happiness, fulfilling interpersonal relationships, and tangible benefits from central government policy. A comparison of participant responses by occupational groups reveals that farmers
provided consistently lower quality-of-life ratings than industrial and service-sector workers, a pattern that is in line with the widening economic disparities within Futian and similar rural communities throughout China as the country undertakes economic reforms.

In this case, it is clear that quality-of-life indicators are not strictly economic; they also include considerations of equity, health, and well-being. Perhaps most significantly, analysis of survey results reveals intracommunity differences in attitudes about some of the central issues facing the township, including the costs and benefits of industrial development. Participants’ responses are ultimately tied to their experiences of the profound social and economic changes driven by China’s recent economic reforms.

With this in mind, development interventions in China that address social and economic inequity are most likely to meet with success. China’s widening income gap, both within and between communities, carries great potential for social unrest (Riskin et al. 2001). As the system of state benefits provided under the socialist system continues to unravel, this case study raises some important political and moral questions about how the profits of economic development are distributed, and who is left behind in this process. To some extent, local government officials are already working to address farmers’ concerns. For example, Tangba village, the poorest of the township’s four villages, was recently selected for the nationally funded “new socialist village” program. Local cadres are investing government funds in the construction of a biogas facility as a way of recycling human and animal wastes and harnessing methane gas for household heating and cooking. More crucially, recent enforcement actions by China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) have resulted in the closure of Futian’s factories for excessive pollution emissions (Tilt 2007). This has already resulted in significant financial losses for the township, but exactly how it will affect the long-term well-being of Futian’s residents remains to be seen.

Anthropologists who conduct community-based research programs have a key role to play in identifying appropriate development targets and implementing culturally sensitive development practices. Using locally salient measures of quality of life in development projects makes both academic and pragmatic sense. From a critical academic perspective, the use of one-size-fits-all development indicators represents a perpetuation of unequal power relationships between the developed and less-developed regions of the world. Anthropologists who work in international development and use their training to understand emic values, attitudes, and behaviors quite rightly find this approach troubling. From a pragmatic standpoint, identifying and using appropriate development indicators helps both to encourage buy-in from community members and to accomplish the goal of participatory development currently espoused by most development agencies. Anthropology, with its emphasis on community-based research methods, is uniquely positioned to help make explicit some of the values and attitudes that underlie development goals but are not fully recognized by development agencies or integrated into development practices.

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1. The current global financial crisis poses a great challenge to China’s continued economic growth. It remains to be seen how the Chinese Communist Party will handle the social unrest that may arise from slowed economic growth and rising unemployment.

2. A mu is the traditional Chinese measure for land area. One mu is equal to 0.066 hectares or 0.165 acres.

3. The exchange rate at the time was approximately 8.2 yuan = 1 USD.

4. The closure of local factories has already resulted in significant financial losses for the township, but exactly how it will affect the long-term well-being of Futian’s residents remains to be seen. China’s State Environmental Protection Administration was upgraded to full ministerial status and became the Ministry of Environment in 2008.

REFERENCES CITED


ON THE QUESTION OF SHORT-TERM NEANDERTHAL SITE OCCUPATIONS

Payre, France (MIS 8-7), and Taubach/Weimar, Germany (MIS 5)

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We analyze and compare the evidence of human behavior from two Middle Paleolithic localities with short-term (seasonal) occupations: Payre in France (level F, correlated to MIS 8-7) and Taubach in Germany (correlated to MIS 5e). We focus on the lithic assemblages from these occupation levels. Our analysis takes the density of lithic material, technological choices, and the typological composition of the assemblages in the two localities into account. In light of previously published models, the results are partially consistent with various types of land-use as supported by analysis of the lithic assemblages. Our results confirm that Neanderthals were able to develop diverse behaviors in different locations. Although flexible and highly adaptable among the different seasons and landscapes of Western Europe, different types of short occupations may indicate the same kinds of technical and typological strategies.

Numerous attempts have been made to characterize occupations and the types of territory that hominids exploited, from very ancient sites such as those of the Oldowan and Acheulean (e.g., Carbonell et al. 1999; Goren-Inbar and Speth 2004; Leakey 1971) to settlements of Neanderthals and early anatomically modern humans (e.g., Isaac 1981; Kuhn 1995; Mellars 1996; Rolland 2001). In most sites, the sedimentary record is not fine-grained enough to distinguish individual occupations that were limited in time; this is particularly true of cave sites. The superposition of archaeological assemblages makes it impossible to estimate the thickness of each individual accumulation, and consequently to evaluate the duration of the settlement represented by this material.

One method of describing the nature of a human settlement is to study the faunal remains of anthropogenic origin that vary according to the location of the site and its age, environmental context, and game availability. However,