

Introductory Essay: Development in Contemporary China

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The articles in this special issue all are based on original fieldwork in China. The authors made presentations on their work in a session at the Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting in Vancouver BC, on March 29, 2006. Since that time we have shared drafts of our manuscripts and integrated our work to illustrate both the diversity of the development enterprise in China and common themes emerging from indigenous norms and social structures.

Development in Context: Contemporary Chinese Economy and Society

Since its founding in 1949 the People's Republic of China has pursued a modernist vision of rapid economic development, with several policy variants. From the 1950s through the 1970s, 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. The plenary session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978 marked the beginning of a suite of economic reform policies known as Reform and Opening (*gaige kaifang*). Thirty years of gradual reform have brought sweeping social and economic changes, including the return of smallholder agriculture under the Household Responsibility System, the privatization of industrial production, greater integration into the world economy, and the rise of a consumer class. China's gross domestic product has grown nearly 10% per year over that time period, and its economy is expected to be the largest in the world within the next two decades.

More than any other concept, development is a salient national goal that serves as a rallying point for various administrative levels of the Chinese government. Development in the Chinese context contains both materialist and normative aspects. On the material side, development policies and practices aim to improve living standards for the Chinese citizenry by increasing agricultural and industrial outputs, generating employment opportunities, and increasing household incomes. On the normative side, these policies and practices are also laden with intangible yet significant goals such as the creation of "modern" citizens and the realization of true economic and social competitiveness on the world stage. In this regard, development entails overcoming what is collectively perceived as the nation's backward, "feudal" past by leveraging science and technology in a march toward an imagined, if uncertain, future

of prosperity. A common billboard, visible in many Chinese cities during the early part of this decade, featured the smiling face of Deng Xiaoping, architect of the Reform and Opening policies, with a bold caption: “Development is the indisputable truth” (*Fazhan cai shi ying daoli*).

Many of the problems facing China (rural-urban migration, uneven distribution of wealth, and the rapid exploitation of natural resources, among others) are shared with other developing nations. But the Chinese case is unique in its scale and in its pace. To examine economic development in contemporary China is to witness one-fifth of humanity (more than 1.3 billion people) undergoing some of the most dramatic changes to livelihood and lifestyle in history. In China, things happen on a grand scale.

A central development goal for China’s current leadership is to provide *xiaokang* (literally “small comfort”) for the citizenry. *Xiaokang*, which translates roughly as “being well off,” is a historical concept with roots in the 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. Many urban residents in China’s highly developed eastern regions have already achieved such a standard. But the distribution of social and economic benefits from development has been highly uneven. China’s vast interior, with less developed markets and comparatively little access to foreign capital, is falling further behind (Wang and Hu 1999). Inequality between individuals, communities, and regions is on the rise and constitutes one of the most persistent social problems in reform-era China (Riskin and Khan 2005).

What is the role of the socialist Chinese state in this analysis? The past three decades have witnessed the “retreat” of the state from many of its duties of the socialist period, including setting commodity prices, directing industrial production, controlling the flow of labor migration, and distributing the

proceeds of development. These and other key tasks are now firmly in the purview of the market rather than the state (Oi 1999). But the Chinese Communist Party still holds exclusive political control and is still responsible for formulating basic development strategies for the nation. To this extent, the Chinese government has staked its legitimacy on realizing effective economic development. It is in the paradoxical position of promoting liberal economic reforms, which most Chinese felicitously call "socialism with Chinese characteristics," and simultaneously working to retain its singular grip on political power. Reform and Opening has also ushered in a new era of integration into global economics and politics, both in terms of direct investment and in terms of bilateral and multilateral involvement in development projects in China.

Representation of Different Types of Development Projects

Our coverage of different types of development projects in contemporary China includes analysis of two cases of international interventions conducted by multilateral development agencies and two examples of domestic projects of various scales. One of the international case studies involves The World Bank initiative to introduce the practice of social assessment to China, while the other involves the United Nations Development Program and an evaluation of a demonstration energy project. Social assessment is done before project implementation, whereas evaluation is done during project implementation and after project completion. Both tasks increasingly involve anthropologists, whose cultural knowledge and ethnographic training is well suited to development work. In fact, Western-trained anthropologists have long been a part of the development enterprise in China; the imminent Fei Xiaotong, who studied under Malinowski, conducted fieldwork and made

policy recommendations on rural development beginning in the 1930s (Wang and Young 2006).

The two domestic projects involve large-scale infusion of capital into an economically marginal area, peasant adaptations to the loss of rural industry, and self-directed efforts of a rural community to link to the larger market economy. The topical scope of these four studies represents the major development strategies and initiatives in contemporary China, including transportation infrastructure, renewable energy, pollution control, and cash cropping agriculture.

Emergent Themes in the Context of Development in China

All authors in this special issue show in various ways how the role of the researcher is restricted in China by cultural and political factors. The obstacles and barriers they faced range from an inability to define their scope of work, to constant and close supervision by officials, restrictions on research sampling, and pre-approval of research protocols and interview questions by government officials. Researchers are forced to navigate multiple levels of government bureaucracy and to give face to public officials along the way as a precondition to receiving research permission. Foreign researchers working on foreign-funded projects face particular challenges, both because their motivations are suspect and because their research protocols are culturally embedded and often do not represent neutral best practice in a cross-cultural setting. Certain types of development projects and protocols may be seen as an imposition from the West, leading to a clash of cultural values.

The authors in this special issue also observed a significant social and political gap between peasants in the countryside and the urban bureaucracy. This gap is manifest both as a lack of understanding of peasant concerns and an exclusion of peasants from discussions and decisions that affect their lives.

Holyoak's treatment of community development in a Manchu village, for example, suggests that development from below is often motivated by village traditions and kinship relations, while development from above is motivated by accumulation of financial capital. This disjuncture between the values of the center and the periphery is a recurring theme in much of Chinese political history and one that takes on new significance in the context of contemporary development. Various forms of resistance inevitably arise as peasants try to prevent losing control over their lives and as the objectives of regional governments occasionally clash with the neo-liberal development agenda espoused by China's central government and many multilateral development agencies.

China's 55 officially recognized minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*), many of whom live on the social and economic periphery of the country, represent a special development problem for the government bureaucracy (Guan and Young 2002; Harrell 1995). Minority peoples figure prominently in all the studies represented in this special issue, ranging from the Manchu and Koreans in Northeast China to the Uygurs in the Northwest and the Hmong and Yi in the Southwest. Evidence of stereotyping, marginalization and discrimination emerges as minorities provide normative justification for targeted development while simultaneously suffering from a perceived incapacity to achieve successful development. Holyoak shows how minority attempts to use ritual may not be effective because of their perceived incapacity to take advantage of opportunity and inability to reciprocate.

As China's development strategies become ever more intertwined with the international development industry, its discourse and practices increasingly reflect international values such as environmental protection and sustainable development. Young et al.'s analysis of a UNDP-funded biomass energy project illustrates how a mastery of the discourse of sustainability can bring credibility and green investment from

abroad. Tilt and Xiao's examination of the economic and social consequences of pollution control shows how the international discourse of sustainable development shapes the attitudes and actions of pollution enforcement officials.

Yet despite this recent espousal of international values and practices, local cultural norms continue to profoundly influence the course of development in China. Guldin and Dennis's analysis of social assessment practices conducted by the World Bank in China reveals the extent to which these practices are the cultural and historical products of the West. In fact, Western concepts such as social assessment and community participation often meet with considerable resistance from local government officials, who view themselves as defenders of China against ravaging, neoliberal foreigners. Social connections (*guanxi*) with government officials and others in positions of power play a crucial role in attracting, designing and implementing development projects. This highlights the fact that development is a political action, set in a context of power relations and shaped by local cultural realities.

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