

# **GALVANIZING LOCAL RESOURCES: A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL CHINA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

China has been undergoing a rapid development over the past decades, and rural areas are facing a number of challenges in the process of the change. The ‘New Channel’ project, initiated to promote sustainable development and protect natural and cultural heritage in Tongdao county in China from a rapid urbanization and economic development, employed an ethnographic study and a strategic design approach to explore the local context and to identify opportunities for sustainable development. In particular, Hengling village, a small village consisting of 307 households in Tongdao county, was studied by a group of design researchers for ten days. Findings from an ethnographic study and a strategy planned to promote sustainable development in Hengling village are presented.

## **KEYWORDS**

Sustainable rural development, Cultural heritage, Rural China, Design for social innovation

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

As scholars pointed out, rural development is a big issue in China (Lou, 2013: 17-21). A large number of Chinese villages are “*undergoing a tremendous process of change*” (Fei, 2013), although the process and consequences of the changes are often questionable from a perspective of sustainability. Fei (ibid.) claims neither ‘a reproduction of the West’ or ‘restoration of the past’ can be the answer to the villages in transformation, and emphasizes “*A correct understanding of the existing situation based on empirical facts will assist in directing the change towards a desired end.*” (ibid., p.25)

The ‘New Channel (新通道)’ project presented in this paper shares a similar perspective. China has achieved significant improvements in some areas such as GDP and urbanization in the past 30 years, but rapid urbanization has destroyed many regional, cultural, and traditional communities (Ji, et al. 2014: 345). To promote alternative – more sustainable, and community-oriented - ways of development, the School of Design at Hunan university has initiated the project ‘New Channel: Design and social innovation summer camp’. Since 2009, groups of researchers and students have carried out field studies in several villages in Tongdao (通道) county in order to better understand the situation of small, under-developed rural villages in this area. Tongdao (which means ‘channel’), located in Hunan province in China, is well-known for its beautiful landscape, traditional architecture, and cultural heritage of Dong ethnic group (侗族), but small villages in the county are ‘one of the poorest places in the country due to the lack of economic development (Ji & Yang, 2010)’. The natural environment, traditional architecture, and unique culture of Dong minority group are still well-preserved in small villages, but a rapid development has taken place in the city center of Tongdao (e.g. figure 1) recently.



Figure 1. Tongdao city center



Figure 2. Hengling village

## 2. ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

This year, the field study was carried out in ‘Hengling (横岭)’ village (Figure 2) in Tongdao county. The Hengling village is a small village consisting of 307 households, and 1500 residents in total. A team of three design researchers and four postgraduate students stayed in the village for ten days from 18<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> July 2014 to conduct an ethnographic study. The ethnographic study aimed to gain better understanding of the local lifestyle, the needs of residents, and material and non-material heritage in the village. Data were gathered mainly through observation, and face-to-face in-depth interviews. Interview participants were chosen by researchers to involve villagers with different age, gender, and occupation. Ranging from the youngest participant, a 17-year-old high school girl, to the oldest participant, a 63-year-old retired construction worker, twelve local residents were interviewed in the home or workplace of the interviewee (Figure 3). Interviews were conducted based on eighteen questions about family member, daily life, income, living expenses, traditional culture, and dissatisfaction with current life. The interviewees were also asked to give a tour of the house, and show their favorite everyday products.



Figure 3. The research team interviewing an old lady living in the Hengling village

Although the number of interview participants was limited, the data collected from interviews revealed a number of facts that is noteworthy. Firstly, all of interview participants have family members who moved out to other cities for economic reasons (Figure 4). As it is difficult to find a stable job with a sufficient salary in the village, young members of the village tend to move to nearby cities such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Shenzhen. As a result, the majority of the residents in the villages are the elders and their grandchildren, since many young couples moved to cities to make a living, but left their children in the village.

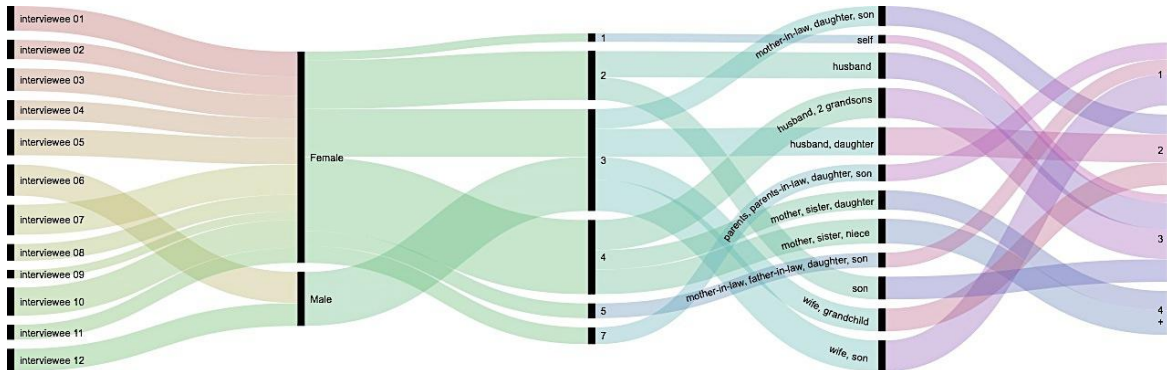


Figure 4. Visualization of data collected from interviews: Interviewee, gender, the number of family member living in the village, family member who live with the interviewee, and the number of family member living outside village for economical reasons.

It was also found that people who currently live in the village have experience of living outside the village for economic reasons. Among the twelve people we interviewed, nine people used to live other cities to earn money. Half of them had lived in other cities for more than 10 years before they retired and came back to the village. Although the residents of the Hengling village prefer to live and work in the village, and their expected minimum salary to work in the village is relatively low (most of the interviewees answered 2000 yuan - which is less than 250 euros - per month is acceptable), the limited job opportunities have led young generation to leave the village to find a job in cities. Statistics shows that each household in the Hengling village owns land for farming, but the amount of the produce is not enough to contribute to the income of the household due to the limitation of the land (0.7 mu; approx. 0.1155 acre per household), the poor quality of soil and insufficient irrigation facilities.

From the interviews, and observation, it was noticed that the residents of the Hengling village have a strong sense of community. A number of communal space in the village were always full of people chatting with each other (Figure 5, left), playing games, and taking a nap. Communal dinners were often organized when there was a special occasion ranging from a marriage to a funeral. Even during the short period of time the research team stayed in the village, a couple of communal meals were organized; one day to welcome the research team (Figure 5, right), and another day to celebrate a newborn baby in the village.



Figure 5. People chatting at communal space (left), Local women preparing communal lunch (middle), A banquet organized to welcome the research team (right)



The traditional lifestyle is still maintained in people’s everyday lives. Most houses are traditional wooden houses, and most furniture is made of wood too. Domestic appliances like washing machine, air conditioner, and microwave oven are rarely used. It is very common for the residents to wash clothes in the river (Figure 6, middle) instead of using washing machine. Among the twelve interviewees, eleven people told us that they eat rice and vegetables that they cultivate, instead of buying food from a market.



Figure 6. An interviewee’s kitchen (left), a villager washing clothes in the river (middle), a villager working in her farm (right)

### 3. EMPOWERING LOCAL ECONOMIES BY VITALIZING LOCAL RESOURCES: A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

From the perspective of the ‘three pillars of sustainable development’ (United Nations General Assembly, 2005), the weakest aspect of the Hengling village seemed the economic development. Environmental protection has been managed strongly since the village is nominated to the Tentative list of Chinese World Cultural Heritage. The local and central government have been active in protecting the natural environment and traditional architecture against imprudent land development or construction of new buildings that may have a detrimental effect on the environment. From a perspective of social sustainability, the strong sense of community among villagers, and various social events and communal activities that strengthen social bond do not seem to need additional interventions.

However, the ethnographic study revealed the needs of enhancing local economy for the future of Hengling village. Thus, based on a hypothesis that (re)vitalizing local physical, cultural, and social resources (e.g. figure 7) can be one way to empower local economics and promote sustainable development in the village, the New Channel project pays particular attention on three local resources: Brocade, Landscape, and Wood. Consequently, under the framework project ‘New Channel (新通道)’, three self-standing projects that aim to develop these resources into local businesses - Brocade, Tourism, Furniture - are proposed.

Firstly, the brocade project intends to utilize the rich cultural heritage of Dong brocade (figure 8, left). There exist a few local businesses producing brocade products, which are mostly replicas of traditional brocade. Secondly, the tourism project intends to make use of the beautiful landscape and traditional architectures in the village. Interestingly, during the interviews with local residents, some of the interviewees showed special interests and high expectation in tourism business as they believe it can be a good opportunity for them to develop a new career within the village. Thirdly, Hengling village is rich in wood, since 81% of the land is woodland. Yet, the furniture available in the local markets is quite limited in terms of style and type. Given the high quality of wood produced in this area, it is considered that there is a potential to develop local business through collaboration between product designers and local wood manufacturers (figure 8, right).

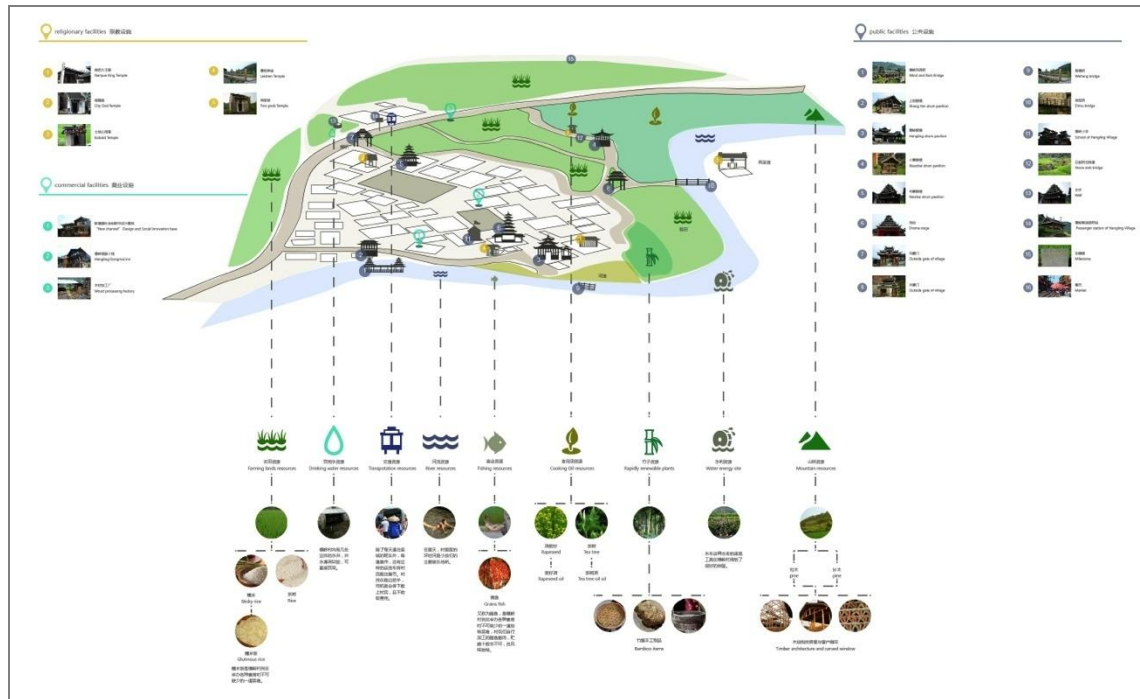


Figure 7. A map developed by the research team to visualize various resources in the village (image by Mengdie Chen)



Figure 8. Products in the local brocade store (left), local wood manufacturer (right)

Among the three projects, the brocade project has commenced first. The project team rented a house in the village and transformed it into a workshop for brocade (figure 9, left). Local residents – mostly elderly women – who have the knowledge and skills of making traditional brocade are invited to collaborate with fashion designers to produce more marketable fashion items including cloths, scarfs, and bags (figure 9, right). Currently the local weavers are paid by the research fund of this project, but the brocade project team is preparing to launch an e-commerce platform to promote the brocade and to connect local producers with customers (e.g. city dwellers) who want to buy the products.

Although it is difficult to evaluate the contribution of these projects at this moment, as they are under development, the three projects are expected to create more job opportunities in the village and increase residents' income by creating synergy under the framework project of 'New Channel'. A similar strategy, described as 'acupunctural planning' (Jegou, 2011; Manzini, 2010) or 'planning by projects' (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011) has shown how large-scale transformation processes are fostered when interrelated small-scale projects are synergised and amplified by larger initiative. Similarly, the above mentioned three projects - Brocade, Tourism, and Furniture - will be developed into different local businesses, but ultimately the three projects aim to mutually reinforce in improving local economy and at the same time vitalizing and promoting the values embedded in the natural, material and cultural resources of the village.



Figure 9. Local women working at the workshop established as a part of New Channel project (left). Collaborative work between fashion designers and local women (right). The pattern was designed by the fashion designers, then woven by local women

#### 4. NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL CHINA

The current situation of Hengling village seem environmentally and socially sustainable to a considerable extent, since the residents have maintained traditional ways of living: they consume locally grown food, make products by using locally available materials, appreciate the natural environment, and have a strong sense of community with their neighbors. While developed countries have put an effort to envision and promote such ways of living for sustainable futures (e.g. SPREAD, 2012), rural areas in developing countries often exhibit ‘sustainable qualities (Manzini & Tassinari, 2013)’ in current everyday lives.

Yet, the situation can be changed anytime soon. Similar to developed countries where unsustainable ways of living have become dominant lifestyle in the process of the rapid industrial development and urbanization, the lifestyle of rural areas in developing countries may undergo a change towards an unsustainable direction in the near future. In fact, some changes were already observed in Hengling village. More and more houses are refurbished in a so-called “modern” style (figure 10, left, middle), instead of traditional style (figure 10, right). Household products made of straw or wood are becoming replaced by plastic products, which the villagers think more durable and stylish. Traditional costumes of the Dong ethnic group (e.g. figure 11, left and middle) were still popular among elderly women, but rarely worn by young generation (figure 11, right). Such change may be accelerated in 2015 when a high-speed train will connect Tongdao to nearby big cities.



Figure 10. Houses refurbished in a modern style (left, middle), a house renovated in a traditional style (right)

Outsiders like a team of researchers cannot stop the change nor force certain ways of living to local people for the sake of sustainability. Still, researchers have a role to play to steer the change towards a more sustainable direction. For instance, tourism business, which is high on the agenda of local government, can be a double-edged sword for the future of Hengling village. Undoubtedly, Hengling village is rich in natural and cultural resources attractive to tourists, and the development of tourism industry can contribute to local economy. However, a growing number of tourists may damage the well-preserved natural environment of Hengling village, and also may disrupt the traditional lifestyle of local people. The identity and cultural heritage of the village may be put in danger of commodification, as already happened in other villages in



Tongdao. Whether the tourism industry will improve or deteriorate the quality of life of local people and environment will depend on the way the tourism business will be headed for.



Figure 11. Elderly women wearing traditional costume (left, middle), young women in the village (right)

One way to steer the change towards a more sustainable direction is to propose an actionable, sustainable option. As Thackara (2013) pointed out, material and cultural qualities in a territory “*might be not so obvious to those who live in them*” (p.4), thus the new work for designers is to cast fresh and respectful eyes to reveal them (ibid.). Similarly, the ‘New Channel’ project started by exploring tangible and intangible assets in the village and bringing them into light. Then, some of the assets were highlighted and proposed as business opportunities - brocade, tourism, and furniture - not only to empower local economy, but also to protect and promote the material and cultural qualities embedded in Hengling village. For instance, a young woman we interviewed told us that she has not tried to learn traditional weaving skill because she was not interested in the brocade, like most young women in the village. But she said she is willing to learn the skill if it will help her to find a job in the village because she prefers to live and work in the village, rather than moving to a city to make a living.

It will take a considerable amount of time and effort to implement these ideas, and it is not certain whether these businesses will succeed or not. Yet, these proposals may provide a more sustainable, and community-oriented way to develop the village beyond a paradigm of modernization and urbanization or nostalgia for the past. Wen et al. (2012) argued today’s problems that rural China face require “*different ways of thinking*” beyond the scheme of modernization, and “*forms of thought that respect local, indigenous culture*” (p.35). This paper underlines that a design-oriented approach can be a promising way by virtue of its appreciation of cultural, social, and environmental qualities, and collaborative ways of working with local communities. This paper discussed a case of the Hengling village, but the implication is not limited to this specific village. After all, many rural villages in China face similar challenges, ranging from ‘vanishing traditional skills’ to ‘low income’, and to ‘population loss and empty-nest households’ (Lou, 2013: 20-22).

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