

# Chapter 1

## Miaoxia Community Kitchen: A Socio–Material Approach Towards Rural Sustainability

**Peter Hasdell**

*The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*

**Hok Bun Ku**

*The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*

**Jze Yi Kuo**

*The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong*

### ABSTRACT

*The collaborative research in rural Sichuan involved two disciplines: the applied social sciences and spatial design and their research methodologies and action research provided the “software” as community engagement and social organization and the development design “hardware” outcomes through participatory design processes. This resulted in a community kitchen that enabled villagers to develop social enterprises and collective organizations. The outcomes produced greater cohesiveness and self-organization, helping to rejuvenate a stagnant village. The repositioning of design within dynamic social processes as a socio-material assembly or as design together with its social attributes, expands the idea that the participatory design can be a complex adaptive system of knowledge generation. This has broader implications in outlining how collaborative social design approaches positively impact sustainable rural development, generating an understanding of resources, capacities, and capabilities as local knowledge ecologies, and tools of social innovation and change.*

### INTRODUCTION: MIAOXIA COMMUNITY KITCHEN CONTEXT

Miaoxia Village is situated in a rural valley near to Shangli historic town and to the prefecture level town of Ya'an, approximately three hours drive to the west of Chengdu in Sichuan Province, China. Geographically the river plains and surrounding wooded hills provide good quality subsistence farmland while forestry and related industries are found in the higher hills. The proximity to these natural resources has led to the predominance of wooden buildings in the region. An agriculture community with strong

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kinship, cultural, social and familial ties, the village and region have a strong Tibetan influence, due to the connecting valleys linking to the Tibetan Plateau in the nearby Garze Autonomous Region. In 2013 the Lushan earthquake affected the region and to some extent Miaoxia Village disrupting the provision of social services and economic wellbeing. The earthquake impacted and diverted some river courses, affecting the formerly irrigated farmlands which could no longer function in the same ways they had been used to. There was also some damage to physical structures as well.

In Miaoxia, as can be found in many thousands of other villages across China, almost all working age adults have left to seek employment in cities elsewhere. The remaining villagers include around 200 left-behind elderly and 75 left-behind children. This aging community and its physical environs accordingly have become dilapidated and rundown, with substandard living conditions. The village houses and facilities accordingly suffer numerous problems including very poor sanitation, poor hygienic conditions, dim lighting, lack of public space and very little social or economic provision. A process asset mapping that involved gathering oral histories by embedded social workers, determined the history of Miaoxia and discovered ancestors of Yang (one of the major families in Miaoxia) were originally high ranking military officers in the Qing dynasty, and their large houses with sophisticated woodcarvings revealed the social status and wealth of the village in the past. The predominance of wooden buildings - some over 150 years old - of the older villages in the region also bears witness to a (now declining) tradition of wood craftsmanship skills in the area. Through this process, it was discovered that many elderly building masters have knowledge of traditional construction processes, skills and local material resources that are presently disappearing. This signifies the continual erosion of the patrimony of the area. Significantly, the wood buildings in this earthquake prone region of Sichuan are an ongoing testament to local knowledge and expertise in which the long-lasting durability and earthquake resilience of these structures is notable, whilst more recent concrete buildings are easily damaged as evidenced in recent earthquakes.

Rural community development is a critical issue in China's ongoing socio-spatial transformation. Many rural villages in recent years have been affected by a complex range of macro-issues, policy changes and transformations in the socio-cultural systems and by economic shifts. These have impacted a wide range of both tangible and intangible issues. Rural land and agrarian practices have evidenced an increasing patchwork suburbanization of the rural environment and loss of farmable lands (Guldin, 1997); as well as the corporatisation of agriculture; the dilapidation and depopulation of traditional villages; and the loss of associated agricultural and cultural practices and skillsets. The depopulation for instance goes hand in hand with the corresponding increase in rural-urban migration and the related development of urban villages in cities elsewhere and is inextricably coupled with the increase in left behind children whose parents have sought employment in other provinces; (Friedman, 2005; Lin, 2009; Xuefei, 2013). There are thought to be over 60 million left behind children in China. The resultant hollowing out of rural communities and alteration of their socio-economic conditions is interconnected with the aging of the rural population and eventual decline or disappearance of villages. Broadly we can say that government policies concerning the 600 million rural population and agriculture together with the modernisation of China have strongly impacted local economic wellbeing, social and cultural development and long-term sustainability in rural areas. The longer term environmental effects of this are clearly uncertain.

This was recognised under the policy of "Construction of New Socialist Countryside" arising from the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10). This policy addressed accrued imbalances that arose during the economic and urbanization development emphasis of previous Five-Year plans. This aimed at the promotion of harmonious rural-urban and socio-economic development for the estimated 600 million strong rural population, thereby representing a key transition point in China's modernization in recent decades. During

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