



Social Work Education

Transformative Social Work Education through a Joint MSW Programme: From Participatory Action Research to Policy and Practice Innovation in China

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5 **Transformative Social Work Education through a Joint MSW Programme: From**
6 **Participatory Action Research to Policy and Practice Innovation in China**
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16 **Abstract:**

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18 In China, social work was re-established in 1988. Despite the number of social work
19 programmes increased very fast throughout the 1990s, there was a huge need for social
20 work-trained educators. The XXX University and XXX University launched the MSW
21 (China) Programme in 2000 to create a critical mass of social work educators who
22 would assume future leadership in social work development in mainland China.
23 Participatory action research was employed as a methodology to explore how social
24 work education could transform students into catalysts for social work education and
25 social development. Purposive sampling was adopted, and seven cohorts totaling 238
26 graduates who graduated from the programme were the participants in this research.
27 Data collection and analysis were carried out throughout the action research process.
28 We found the triple capacity building model to be a good pedagogy to foster
29 transformation among participants, and to steer the knowledge co-creation, practice
30 innovation, policy reform, and social change through social work education. In this
31 paper, we will provide an overview of the background, vision, and mission, as well as
32 the teaching pedagogy of the programme and a case study to demonstrate how social
33 work education has an impact on policy and practice innovation in China.
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41 **Keywords:** transformative social work education, participatory action research,
42 capacity-building, social work in China, , practice and policy innovation
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46 **Introduction**

47
48 Together with other social science disciplines, social work was deemed "bourgeois
49 pseudo-science" and was eliminated from all universities in the early 1950s after the
50 establishment of the People's Republic of China (Wang, 2012; Yuen-Tsang et al., 2014;
51 Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2020). Following the implementation of the Open Door Policy
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5 in 1978, some leading academics and political leaders who were previously trained in
6 social work and sociology fervently advocated the reintroduction of social work as a
7 discipline into the university curriculum. They recognized the necessity for training
8 professional social workers to deal with the escalating social problems brought about
9 by the market economy and rapid social and economic change. The institutional
10 infrastructures prior to the reform were successful in appeasing grassroots complaints
11 and fostering political unity since most of the societal complaints were previously
12 "absorbed" by these government-controlled channels.
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21 The old institutional systems could no longer handle the complexity of newly
22 emerging social concerns (Xiong & Wang, 2007; Yueng-Tsang et al., 2014). In 1986,
23 after a hiatus of more than 30 years, the Chinese government decided to reinstate social
24 work education programmes in higher education institutions in order to provide
25 professional skills in resolving urgent social issues brought on by rapid social change
26 (Xiong & Wang, 2007). In 1988, Peking University became the first university to offer
27 social work programmes at the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, very few
28 of the teachers had received formal professional social work training, despite the fact
29 that the number of schools offering social work programmes increased throughout the
30 1990s. In this context, in response to the urgent need for training for social work
31 educators, a Master of Social Work (China) Programme was launched by XXX
32 University together with XXX University in 2000. The programme's goal was to
33 nurture a critical mass of social work educators who could assume future leadership
34 roles in advancing social work and social work education in Mainland China and to
35 bring about positive social transformation. Seven cohorts totaling 238 graduates have
36 graduated from the programme and they have played a pivotal role in the transformation
37 of social work education, practice, and policy in Chinese mainland.
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5 In the following, the authors will provide an overview of the vision and mission,
6 methodology, and the pedagogy of the MSW (China) programme. They will also
7 provide case studies on how Participatory Action Research (PAR) was used as
8 methodology and pedagogy to foster transformation among the students, teachers,
9 service users, and stakeholders and to steer the co-creation of local knowledge, practice
10 innovation, policy reform and social change through social work education.
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19 **Theoretical and Methodological Approach**

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21 The MSW (China) programme was a ‘training of trainers’ programme designed
22 specifically for experienced social work educators (though some experienced
23 practitioners and NGO leaders were included in the later cohorts to facilitate
24 collaboration and dialogue between educators and practitioners). The programme was
25 offered on a three-year part-time basis to allow the students to stay on their jobs while
26 pursuing their studies. We believe that social work education is transformative and
27 catalytic and could bring about transformation not only to us and to our students, but
28 also to the larger society (Yuen-Tsang et al., 2014). Through the programme, we
29 endeavoured to help students to identify the deep-seated assumptions they have about
30 the social world and their connections with it; to recognize how political and social
31 contexts shape our values and theories; and to encourage them to challenge the
32 embedded dogmas regarding what was normal or acceptable in social work practice.
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34 The goal of our programme was “to develop a critical mass of committed, competent,
35 reflective and culturally sensitive social work educators to take up the future leadership
36 in developing social work and social work education in China” (Yuen-Tsang & Wang,
37 2020, p. 8). We aspire to transform students to become critical thinkers and practitioners
38 who can reflect on society, the role of social work, and social work practices (Bay &
39 Macfarlane, 2011).
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7 ***Transformative Education***
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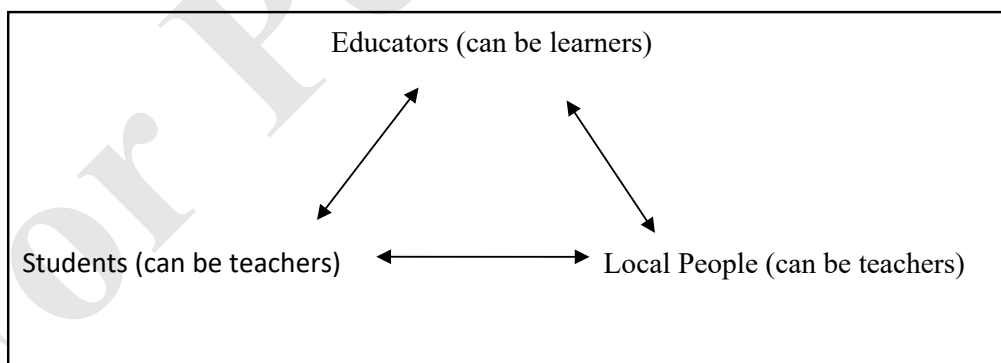
9 Transformative education is our core approach to nurture our students, which
10 emphasizes on transforming our students from passive knowledge recipients to active
11 knowledge co-creators (Ahmed, 2010; Elias, 1997; Mezirow, 2000). We adopt
12 Ahmed's view that that as educators, we must consider "education as transformation"
13 and "education for transformation, and sees education and learning as both the means
14 and the purpose for building sustainable societies, where human potential will be
15 unlocked and human dignity and rights are cherished (Ahmed, 2010). In order to
16 achieve this objective, educators must remain focused on what is possible and realistic,
17 guiding students to develop towards a critical knowledge of reality and enabling them
18 to lead their own processes of becoming. In these years, following the principles of
19 transformative education, we have developed the model of triple capacity building
20 (TCB) in order to transform our students (Ku, et al., 2009).
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33 Capacity building model has been popularly adopted by community service
34 providers to strengthen and support the ability of communities to grow and change (e.g.
35 Li et al., 2001). Along with "empowerment," and "participation," capacity building is
36 also regarded by NGOs as essential elements of an alternative development model,
37 where development is to be sustainable and centered on people (Eade, 1997; Plummer,
38 2000). Applying the idea of capacity building to social work education, we strongly
39 affirm that all students are the subjects of their own learning and knowledge-building
40 processes, and that strengthening the capacity of students to determine their own values
41 and priorities and to act on these is the basis of the teaching and learning process. As
42 our students will be trained to become social work educators and practitioners, it is
43 important that they will hold the belief of capacity building so that they are able to
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5 embrace this approach when carrying out transformative education and practice in local
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7 communities.

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9 We have added a third dimension to the common concept of capacity building, and
10 have included not only the educators, the students, but also the service-users in the
11 capacity building process. We have conceptualized this model as Triple Capacity
12 Building (TCB) (Ku et al., 2009) , asserting that once the learners have realized their
13 subjectivity in the course of learning, the learners will be able to determine their own
14 values and directions in building knowledge, and the resulting understanding will be
15 used to cultivate relationships with their service users and to enlighten them to discover
16 their own capacity and search for their own trajectory for social development and
17 transformation. The whole TCB process will be dynamic, interactive, reflective,
18 enlightening and will critically enhance the capacity of learners, educators, and service
19 users as active agents in their meaning-searching and social transformation processes
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21 (see diagram 1).
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36 Diagram 1: Triple Capacity Building Model (Ku, et al., 2009)



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53 Our TCB approach subscribes to Freire's critical pedagogy which is concerned
54 with issues concerning social difference, social justice and social transformation
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5 (Mezirow, 2000; Ledwith, 2001). It is a pedagogy of liberation of mind and heart, in
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7 which educators/learners situate themselves as agents of transformative action, creating
8
9 the context in which to raise questions. Freire's considered traditional teaching as
10
11 "banking education," a top-down approach to the transmission of knowledge in which
12
13 the teacher is the sole dispenser of knowledge and the students are its passive recipients.
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15 Here, education is an instrument of oppression which block the mind and heart of
16
17 students. Freire assumes that students can acquire critical consciousness by intervening
18
19 in their own life-world situations. Therefore, the educational process could also be an
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21 action that transforms and remakes one's world (Freire, 1972, p. 45).
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25 This situation of 'banking education' is especially obvious in Chinese society, where
26
27 a high level of respect is accorded to intellectuals and experts (Ku, et al., 2005). In such
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29 a society, the educational system could provide teachers with more power and authority
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31 than students and give the teachers the opportunity to dominate the students in the
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33 educational processes through the duality of the educated and uneducated. Such a
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35 process could de-self the students. This inequality of knowledge was not only instituted
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37 in the educational processes per se but was also evident in all sectors of the society
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39 through the system of categorizing people into intellectuals and the masses. If
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41 intellectuals were unaware of their undeserved privileges in society, it would be easy
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43 for them to repeatedly reproduce the unequal power relationship when they engage in
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45 social work practice. To promote equity in our society, the intention behind our TCB
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47 approach was to emancipate and transform all the participants in social work education,
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49 including educators, students, and those from the grassroots, who are all engulfed
50
51 unknowingly by their traditional cultural selves (Ku, et al., 2009).
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54 We also subscribed to the social developmental perspective which endeavored to
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56 improve the welfare of the population through integrated social and economic
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5 development initiatives emphasizing on capacity building of individuals, families, and
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7 communities (Hall & Midgley, 2004; Midgley & Livermore, 1997). We believe that
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9 the integrated and comprehensive nature of the social developmental perspective to
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11 social work education provides a viable way to tackle the massive poverty, deprivation
12
13 and inequality experienced by the Chinese population. Moreover, this perspective
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15 provides opportunities for capacity building, and promotes social and economic change
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17 that produces improvements in standards of living, social well-being and citizen
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19 participation (Hall & Midgley, 2004). As Ledwith (2001) has advocated, social work
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21 education has the same mission as community development, and should call for a re-
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23 invention of self by challenging dominant traditions and cultures by cultivating among
24
25 the learners a broad spectrum of liberal academic knowledge, developing the habit of
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27 inquiry and critical curiosity about society, power, inequality, and fostering a sense of
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29 mission for social transformation through practice.
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31 32 33 ***Participatory Action Research***

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35 To achieve the goal of transformative social work education, we have adopted
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37 Participatory Action Research (PAR) as our methodology which treated research no
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39 longer as solely a means of creating knowledge, it is also a process of education,
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41 development of consciousness, and a call to action to create a more just society through
42
43 transformative social change (Park, 1993; Vickers, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).
44
45 As Bradbury (2015) has stated, “Action research is a democratic and participative
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47 orientation to knowledge creation. It brings together action and reflection, theory and
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49 practice, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern. Action
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51 research is a pragmatic co-creation of knowing with, not on, people.” (p.1) Thus, local
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53 participants are regarded as “knowers”, and their knowledge and experiences are
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55 recognized (Kesby, 2000, p.424) and local people are treated as partners in the research
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5 process to co-create practical knowledge to resolve the problem faced (Gaventa, 1988;
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7 Streck, 2007; Schruijer, 2006; Small, 1995; Park, 1999).
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9 Action research also pays attention to theory building, and the theories in action
10 research are often referred to as action theory and change theory. In this action research,
11 through the educational experiment, we explore effective ways of teaching and learning,
12 produce and refine practical knowledge of how to produce change in research process,
13 and finally generate theory of action and theory of change for social work education.
14 As for us, it is therefore vital to make serious effort to understand the action and change
15 processes and to generate theories from the process of education. The theories generated
16 through these educational actions can be learned by students, educators and
17 practitioners and can have significant impact on social work professional practice in
18 future.
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29 Authors of this paper as programme leaders were the researchers for this project,
30 instructing the teaching team followed the procedure of conducting action research
31 with a objective to construct a new model of transformative education. Purposive
32 sampling was adopted in this study. Instead of concerning the demographics of the
33 subjects for ruling out the potential biases for generalization of the findings from the
34 sample to the large population, subjects including students and teachers, who
35 participated in the educational action process would be included for a action research
36 (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014)).
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46 This study has been approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Committee of the
47 XXX University. Students were fully informed that we were conducting research on
48 the programme and they also cooperatively responded to programme evaluation. Data
49 collection in action research went through the action cycles with multiple methods.
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54 The first stage was to understand the situation of China social work and social
55 development and identify the problems the social work students faced through
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5 induction workshops, interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. In the second stage,
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7 based on finding in the first stage, theories of transformative education were adopted
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9 by teaching team to explore how social work education can transform our students and
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11 local community and creat social impact. Fieldwork practicum was decided by the
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13 teaching team to use as a platform for students to develop their practice competence, to
14
15 engage in critical reflection, to integrate theory with practice, and to nurture their
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17 commitment for social change and social development. In the third stage, fieldwork
18
19 practitcum had been carried out in different parts of China. In the process, participant
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21 observation, oral history, video recording, reflective notes, and in-depth interview were
22
23 employed to collect data. Evaluation was the forth stage in action research, including
24
25 both process and outcome evaluation. In process evaluation, students and local
26
27 participants' engagement, feedback on the process, and the ways of producing
28
29 knowledge in the action process would be recorded. Observation and watching back
30
31 videos helped teaching team to evaluate the learning outcome. Reflection journal of
32
33 students and focus group discussion were also the way to reflect on the experimentation
34
35 and study whether the actions have achieved the objectives and how much improvement
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37 has been made to the baseline set at the beginning of the study. After completed the
38
39 cycle of action research, teachers were invited to share their experience in workshops
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41 and discuss the practical knowledge, practice wisdom, concepts and theories distilled
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43 in action, and reflect on what this research teaches us about social work education.
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46 Different from traditional research, data collection and analysis in action research
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48 are carried out throughout the process. Logic model and timeline are the tools for
49
50 helping research organize and analyze the data systematically. The researchers discover
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52 the action knowledge and change model through read and re-read the data (Greenwood
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54 & Levin, 2007). The process of data analysis is also a process of reflection for the
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56 researchers (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008).
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5 In the following section, we will demonstrate with actual case studies on how
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7 transformative social work education can be actualized by using PAR.
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10 11 **Our Journey in Developing Transformative Social Work Education in China**

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13 As indicated above, the goal of the MSW (China) Programme was “to develop a critical
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15 mass of committed, competent, reflective and culturally sensitive social work educators
16
17 to take up the future leadership in developing social work and social work education in
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19 China” (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2020, p. 8). Having such a visionary mission, we must
20
21 develop educational strategies and pedagogies that could nurture students to become
22
23 qualified social work educators, critical thinkers and practitioners who have the passion
24
25 to serve and the capacity to foster transformative social changes through their education,
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27 practice and policy advocacy endeavours.
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30 The curriculum aimed to prepare non-social work trained students to become
31
32 social work educators in China by emphasising adherence to international standards
33
34 while also focusing on contextualising and indigenizing social work theory and practice
35
36 within the Chinese context. Students were required to take 18 subjects, including 10
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38 required subjects, 2 elective subjects, 3 social work practicums, and a social work
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40 dissertation. In order to ensure that students become competent social work educators,
41
42 they were required to complete three demanding supervised fieldwork practicums. This
43
44 was done to enhance their ability to integrate theory into practice and to foster their
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46 dedication to serving the disadvantaged and vulnerable populations at the local level.
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48 Most of the subjects and practicums were implemented in the Chinese mainland using
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50 an intensive block-mode. Students spent their last semester at the XXX University to
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52 engage in a period of intensive fulltime study and to gain direct practice experience in
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54 social work organizations in Hong Kong.
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5 The graduates networks have played a pivotal role in steering the development of
6 social work and social work education in Mainland China at regional and national levels.
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8 Besides making transformative impact on the students and their immediate working
9 environments, the programme had also created enormous ripple effects on their schools
10 and communities, and have even impacted on the development of social work practice
11 and policy at regional and national levels.
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19 **Phase I: Piloting Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the MSW fieldwork**
20 **practicum to develop a sustainable rural development model in Pingzhai of**
21 **Yunnan**
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25 Fieldwork practicum provides excellent contexts for the students to develop their
26 practice competence, to engage in critical reflection, to integrate theory with practice,
27 and to nurture their commitment for social change and social development. The
28 ‘reciprocal-reflection theory’ developed by Schön (1983, 1987) offers us an alternative
29 way to understand and explain the processes through which a novice develops
30 professional scholarship through reflective practice in designing our fieldwork
31 practicums.
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40 The second practicum took place in the second year of study during the summer,
41 where students participated in an eight-week block placement. At each practicum
42 location, we concentrated on a specific growing social need and applied the PAR model
43 to develop practice models that involve students, teachers, service-users, and
44 occasionally local government officials. The practices encompassed community work,
45 mental health social work, youth work, rehabilitation social work, children and family
46 services, and other areas. In order to ensure that the demonstration projects could be
47 continued and sustained, we usually involved a local university (where at least one of
48 our MSW students came from) as our partner, so that the practicum site could be used
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5 by the respective university as future practicum site for their own social work students.
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7 Usually, a cluster of at least five students would be placed at one site and they would
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9 be supervised by the same supervisor so that they could form a learning community and
10
11 could provide mutual support for each other throughout the practicum process.
12
13 Moreover, it is expected that the different cohorts of students taking part in the same
14
15 practicum site, together with the strategic partners that have involved in the process,
16
17 could form a critical mass to further develop the model of practice that they have
18
19 evolved and could help in spearheading the development of the practice model in China.
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21
22 Over 14 years, the programme established various practicum sites across China,
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24 which have since become exemplary models of practice in the country due to the
25
26 impactful demonstration effect of the projects and the enthusiastic promotion of these
27
28 models by our graduates through teaching, research, and policy advocacy. The field
29
30 placements in this programme encompassed both macro and micro practice to cater to
31
32 students' interest. This section only uses the rural social work development project in
33
34 the Pingzhai of S County in Yunnan as an example to demonstrate how transformative
35
36 social work education could inspire students, develop practice model, and influence
37
38 practice and policy innovation. The practicum was first developed in 2001 for five of
39
40 our first cohort MSW (China) students, but the site continued to be used by subsequent
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42 cohorts of students to further expand the scope and heighten the impact of the project.
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45 Based on the PAR process and the educational principles that we have outlined
46
47 above, the following stages took place in the Pingzhai practicum site.
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51 ***1. Identifying local problems and mapping of existing indigenous practice***
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53 ***approaches through the use of oral history***

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55 One of the foremost social problems haunting Mainland China, particularly in the 2000s,
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57 was rural poverty. Poverty in rural villages was accelerated by market globalization and
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5 migrant workers were pushed out from their villages to take up low-paying jobs in
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7 urban cities. While the Chinese government had already launched anti-poverty
8
9 programmes to combat rural poverty on the macro level, most of the efforts were
10
11 directed towards economic development, and relatively little attention was given to
12
13 social and community development (Luk, 2000). In view of the severity of this problem,
14
15 our programme decided to experiment on a rural social work project in Yunnan
16
17 province through the development of a practicum site, using the TCB as our guiding
18
19 framework. PAR was built into the implementation process with deliberate effort to
20
21 document the process and to gradually evolve an indigenous rural social work model
22
23 that is appropriate to the Chinese context.
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26
27 Pingzhai is an administrative village which was an officially designated poor
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29 township by the government in Yunnan and the majority of residents in seven natural
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31 villages in belonged to the Zhuang ethnic minority. The project started in the summer
32
33 of 2001 and the focus of the first stage was to listen to the voices of local villagers, to
34
35 understand their concerns and problems, and to identify their capacity for development.
36
37 The practicum teachers did not come with preconceived ideas and a fixed agenda for
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39 intervention prior to their entry to the village. As supervisor Y told our students, “We
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41 are not in a position to tell you what to do... All of us should not be preoccupied with
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43 theories or the goals that we have set out for ourselves, but remember that we are not
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45 here to satisfy our needs and fulfill the requirements of this course.” Instead, teachers
46
47 partnered with students and local villagers to discover the needs of the people, to
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49 explore the local wisdom and knowledge that local villagers used to deal with their
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51 problems. As the students did not understand the local dialect, they partnered with
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53 young local villagers to collect oral histories from adult and elderly villagers, and these
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55 young villagers became the interviewers, translators, and active partners in the
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5 community development. The teachers, students and villagers collaborated in analysing
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7 and reflecting on the oral history testimonies collected. Through this mutually
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9 empowering process, they evolved into a learning community of independent and active
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11 learners who were able to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct social work practice
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13 in the local context through critical reflection. As student C shared, "...it is a very
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15 exciting and new learning experience for me. It is the first time to sense myself as the
16
17 subject of education. Now I can make sense what our teachers said about the
18
19 subjectivity and agency of actors."
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22 In this stage, the students were able to build trust and rapport with the local
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24 villagers, discovered the needs and problems of the local community, and mapped out
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26 the existing problem-solving approaches used by local villagers. They were also
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28 encouraged to discover their own strengths and weaknesses as learners and practitioners.
29
30 Although the learning process was often painful for most of the students because they
31
32 were educated in the authoritative tradition and were not used to engaging in critical
33
34 self-reflection, they were elated at the end because of the sense of joy and fulfilment
35
36 which they experienced in the process of mutual discovery and growth. As Student S
37
38 stated, "After the oral history collection, relationship between the villagers and me had
39
40 also been greatly transformed after I relaxed myself. In return, the villagers began to
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42 identify themselves with us, and tried all means to get close to us."
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47 ***2. Co-creating the vision and strategy for rural capacity building and social*** 48 49 ***development through community participation and partnership*** 50

51 After the collection of oral testimonies, focus groups were organized to facilitate the
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53 local villagers to discuss on their findings, vision of their desired community, and
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55 suggestions on actions to achieve their goals through community involvement projects.
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5 This was a deliberate process to build villagers' sense of ownership of their own
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7 problems and to foster their capacity for critical reflection and for leadership in
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9 community building. Different small groups gradually emerged through the process,
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11 including youth group, women's group, senior citizens' group and local leaders' group,
12
13 which started to propose and plan concrete community development initiatives,
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15 including rebuilding community cohesion, restoring cultural heritage, and developing
16
17 local economy so as to generate income and to attract young people to stay in the
18
19 villages.

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21 During the entire process, the students took the role of facilitators rather than
22
23 experts in community development. They modelled their supervisors who had also
24
25 assumed non-expert roles in the teaching and learning process and had partnered with
26
27 them as equal partners throughout the process. The students learned to internalize social
28
29 work values and ethical principles and developed a strong sense of mission to co-work
30
31 with local villagers to alleviate poverty and foster social development in China. As
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33 Student Z stated, "In the process, we learned from our teachers. Now I had my
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35 subjectivity.... What are we to do? How to do it? We had to make a decision all by
36
37 ourselves. Now the villagers had also become a subject themselves too; they therefore
38
39 had to make a decision as to what to do and what not to do in community development."
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44 ***3. Implementing the rural capacity building model***

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46 After having developed a mutually agreeable rural capacity building strategy, the
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48 students facilitated the villagers to actualize their plans through social work practice.
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50 Several projects were finally implemented, including the generation of methane gas for
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52 fuel; the formation of support groups for women and the elderly; the provision of adult
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54 education classes by the educated young villagers for the illiterate; leadership training
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56 for young villagers; teaching ethnic songs and dances for children and young people by
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5 elderly villagers; constructing a local mini-museum on ethnic history and culture
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7 through collection of oral testimonies, songs and cultural artefacts; and the development
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9 of income-generating handicraft projects. All these projects were being discussed,
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11 planned, and implemented collectively by involving the practicum students, teachers,
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13 researchers, villagers, and local stakeholders concerned. The local people also proposed
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15 to build an integrated community center to serve as a hub for local villagers to meet and
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17 to engage in communal activities. The community center was planned, designed and
18
19 built by the collective effort of the villagers. All parties involved in the project had been
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21 transformed by the process. Many villagers were originally very passive and pessimistic
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23 in the past and they felt hopeless in view of the grave poverty in their village. But in
24
25 the process, some villagers gradually changed. We observed that there were a few girls
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27 in particular, who were so shy at first that they would not even lift their heads. After
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29 participated in our projects, they became bold enough to sing some ditties at evening
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31 gatherings and participate in group discussions. Moreover, instead of despising their
32
33 traditional ethnic culture, many of them began to discover the richness of their cultural
34
35 heritage and were keen to preserve and develop. For example, woman J who realized
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37 that they could develop handicraft product to enhance their social and economic well-
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39 being. She worked with us to form women handicraft project and she also became a
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41 women leader finally.
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44 The major challenge confronting our students in this stage was the need to make a
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46 shift from their familiar expert-oriented approach to the collaborative approach. They
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48 discovered that the villagers were full of ideas and had great capacity for development
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50 despite their lack of education and exposure. If they were given opportunities and
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52 encouragement, the villagers could become active to do develop projects to improve
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54 the quality of life not only for themselves, but also for the community. Moreover, the
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56 students also experienced the thrill of being involved in the actual process of
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5 conceptualizing, planning, and implementing social work interventions that had led to
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7 transformative developments. The experience had greatly inspired them and
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9 transformed their conception of social change in the Chinese context.

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13 **Phase II: Reflection, consolidation and implementation of the revised Pingzhai**
14 **rural social work capacity building model with special emphasis on social economy**

15 Reciprocal-reflection-in-action is important for action research evaluation. The
16
17 teachers and students regularly reflect on the practicum process and on the model that
18
19 they had jointly developed with the villagers. Based on the project reflection and
20
21 evaluation by teachers, students, and active villagers, it was jointly decided that the
22
23 priority of the project should focus on poverty alleviation through ensuring the
24
25 sustainability of food and agricultural production, which was not only the top issue in
26
27 Pingzhai, but also in other parts of rural China. While keeping the TCB as the
28
29 overarching practice model, the concept of “social economy” was introduced to enrich
30
31 the theoretical underpinning of our rural capacity building model.
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35 The concept of “social economy” had become popular among social work scholars
36
37 and practitioners in China. Social economy emphasized on people-centred, community-
38
39 based development, as well as the linkages and interconnectedness between the well-
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41 being of different economic subjects, including producers, consumers, inhabitants of
42
43 the local community, and its impact on culture and environment. It also advocated for
44
45 green citizenship and on orientating organisations towards the common good and
46
47 providing the social infrastructure for democratic participation (Smith, 2005; Wright,
48
49 2006). It was therefore adopted by our team to guide the subsequent development of
50
51 our action research on rural capacity building.
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54 The overall goal of our second phase of development was to alleviate rural poverty
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56 through the practice of social economy. The objectives included: 1) searching for a way
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5 of alternative development and poverty eradication; 2) returning to organic farming and
6
7 green development; 3) promoting cooperatives to protect small peasants, traditional
8
9 agriculture and the rural environment; 4) promoting farmers and consumers cooperation
10
11 to increase producers' income through the equal exchange of fair trade; 5) promoting
12
13 Community Supporting Agriculture (CSA) to resist capital monopoly and exploitation.
14

15 After three years of experimentation, we developed the "Rural-urban Alliance
16
17 Practice Model" in 2007. This model had integrated our TCB model with the social
18
19 economy concept and had developed an integrated social-economic strategy which
20
21 emphasized on participation, equality, justice, and fairness. While the women's group,
22
23 youth group, and elderly group continued to play a pivotal role in fostering community
24
25 harmony and preserving their cultural heritage and ethnic identity, numerous income-
26
27 generating initiatives had been developed grounded on local assets. The development
28
29 of organic-farming, production of ethnic handicrafts, development of eco-tourism,
30
31 establishment of production cooperatives, and the formation of urban-rural alliance
32
33 between rural producers and urban consumers based on mutual support and fair-trade
34
35 principles were some of the major income-generating initiatives introduced. After
36
37 another five years of experimentation, we found that the model had successfully met
38
39 the dual-goals of building the capacity as well as improving financial situation of the
40
41 villagers. The most gratifying achievements was the establishment of a core group of
42
43 committed and motivated villagers who were keen to participate in the project.
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45 Through this highly participative and empowering process, many villagers had regained
46
47 their sense of confidence and pride towards themselves, their culture, and community.
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50 Since 2013, the villagers of Pingzhai have become active agents of rural
51
52 development. Twenty rural co-operatives have been established to steer the long-term
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54 community development and continuing improvement of the villagers' income, living
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56 environment, and community life. The higher prices of organic products have enabled
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5 villagers to improve their economic conditions through the urban–rural alliance
6 network. The data has shown average annual income among Pingzhai co-operative
7 member has increased from 3927 RMB in 2014 before joining the coops to 8478 RMB
8 in 2017. Almost all villagers have doubled their household annual income after joining
9 the co-operatives.
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17 **Phase III: Replication and refinement of model in other parts of China through**
18 **capacity building and knowledge co-creation**
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21 The transformation of Pingzhai from a poverty-stricken village where only the elderly,
22 vulnerable and children would stay behind, to a self-sustained, harmonious, and
23 relatively well-off village. Villagers have become catalysts in advocating this rural
24 capacity building model with social economy focus to other villages and to government
25 officials. Together with our team members, the villagers have participated in many
26 social work conferences to share their experience with social work educators and
27 practitioners and to provide testimonies of their success stories. Pingzhai story is now
28 widely known among the social work community in China and are gaining increasing
29 recognition and support by educators, practitioners as well as policy makers (Ku, 2011;
30 Zhang et al., 2008).
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42 Since 2001, the project staff had accumulated a host of experience and data
43 collected through the action research process. We have been illuminated by our
44 experience and especially by the insights gained through the participatory action
45 research process. This indigenous rural capacity building model is appropriate to the
46 Chinese context, which advocated for a bottom-up approach that emphasize the
47 participation of local people to develop their own rural economy based on their real
48 situation. The case of Pingzhai has clearly demonstrated that the cooperation between
49 producers and consumers can help in safeguarding sustainable food production and
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5 consumption and alleviating poverty while respecting the environment. This strategy
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7 has resulted in the formation of the rural-urban alliance model which emphasizes on
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9 community-support agriculture, linking rural cooperatives with the local food supply
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11 system, and allowing farmers to sell directly to urban consumers at fairer prices, has
12
13 clearly provided a viable pathway for sustainable transformation.
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15 In view of the success of Pingzhai, this model was employed to test whether it
16
17 could be replicated in other locations. Between 2008 to now, the model has been
18
19 experimented in many communities mostly through the network of MSW (China)
20
21 graduates, their students and service agencies created by them. The following are some
22
23 major examples: 1) Sichuan post-disaster reconstruction sustainable livelihood project
24
25 in Wenchuan and Ya'an (see Ku & Dominelli, 2018); 2) Guangdong Conghua poverty
26
27 alleviation sustainable rural development project (see Yan et al., 2017); and 3) Henan
28
29 Zhoushan "House of Dreams" project for rural revitalization and culture preservation
30
31 (see, Wu et al., 2022).
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33 This model of rural capacity building has been applied to many locations and has
34
35 yielded extremely positive results that can be applied not only to Mainland China but
36
37 to other parts of the world. In all the rural areas where we introduced our project,
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39 including Guangdong, Sichuan, and Hunan, the model received appreciative
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41 recognition from the local governments. Moving beyond a corporate-led growth model
42
43 typically built on the commodification of land and labour, the practice of social
44
45 economy in rural China has formed an alternative model of rural social work that
46
47 embeds the economy within social relations while promoting environmentally
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49 sustainable practices. The rural-urban alliance model generated in this rural social work
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51 action research offers useful insights for tackling agrarian challenges and moving
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53 towards sustainable rural development.
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5 Based on the knowledge generated through the above experiences, the team has
6
7 been providing workshops for social work educators, practitioners, and students all over
8
9 China to share the PAR pedagogy and our rural capacity building model. Numerous
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11 sharing sessions have been held in different regions for those involved in PAR projects
12
13 to share their experience and the knowledge and the models that they have generated.
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15 It is planned that these learning circles will be further expanded to spread the model
16
17 and PAR concepts among the social work community in China.
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21 **Phase IV: Policy and Practice Innovation at National Level in China**

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23 The rural capacity building model jointly developed by XXX University and XXX
24
25 University in Conghua, Guangdong proved to be effective in poverty alleviation and in
26
27 creating a harmonious community through mutual support and ownership. This project
28
29 had attracted the attention of the provincial as well as national government and found
30
31 this model to be an effective method in poverty alleviation which was the top priority
32
33 agenda of the Central Government to eliminate extreme poverty in the country by 2021.
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35 Mr. Gong Pu-guang, Vice Minister of Civil Affairs, visited our project in Conghua,
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37 Guangdong in 2014 and gave it high praise and regarded this as a viable solution for
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39 poverty in China. With support from the XXX University, Prof. Zhang Heqing
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41 undertook an action research project commissioned by the Guangdong provincial
42
43 government in 2010 to evaluate the effectiveness of the rural–urban alliance model of
44
45 Conghua (2010–2020) and its applicability to eliminate poverty in the province. The
46
47 findings of the evaluation research indicated that the problems associated with rural
48
49 development in Guangdong were typical of other parts of rural China. The rural–urban
50
51 alliance model encouraged social entrepreneurship through organizing production and
52
53 developing urban markets for local products. It has offered an alternative path to rural
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55 development in Guangdong which could fulfil the aims of poverty alleviation as well
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5 as building a harmonious society. The model was adopted by the Guangdong provincial
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7 government and became the framework for the establishment of the “Double Hundreds
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9 Plan” for establishment of 200 social work stations in rural areas in Guangdong. The
10
11 Guangdong Government later escalated the scale of the project and established 407
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13 rural social work stations in Guangdong and the creation of 2,000 rural social worker
14
15 positions in the province from 2017 to 2021. The model has even influenced national
16
17 policies on poverty alleviation and social development. In the 14th Five Year Plan of
18
19 China (2021-2025), it has been proposed that social work stations will be set up
20
21 throughout China by the end of the Five Year Plan period in order to improve the well-
22
23 being of the people, to provide basic social services for all, and to enhance the people’s
24
25 sense of gain, ownership and happiness.
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29 **Discussion and Limitation**

31 Programme evaluation has been implemented in every cohort of the programme. The
32
33 purpose of the evaluation was to identify the gaps and limitations of the actions, to
34
35 refine and improve the programme framework, and to ensure the long-term
36
37 sustainability of programme. Students and teachers, in the project during the period
38
39 were invited to attend the meeting and to share their views about the programme.
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42 The sustainability of this programme is an issue because it is self-financing and
43
44 requires a significant investment of additional manpower, resources, and time. Teachers
45
46 in the programme require extra commitment, as they must spend a lot of time and
47
48 energy traveling to the mainland to teach and supervise practicum. Although many
49
50 teachers are very committed to the programme, it also increases their workload and
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52 pressure. Like Teacher Y told us, “my wife complained a lot that I was on a business
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54 trip to China frequently and lacked time for my children.” Furthermore, the programme
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5 relies on funding support from the foundation, which provides approximately \$5
6 million per cohort. It is also very difficult to sustain in the long run.
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9 The other critical problem identified was the difficulty to change the mindset of
10 people, including teachers, students and local people. Even though the project had
11 adopted a capacity building model and emphasized co-creation through critical
12 reflection, community participation and social development, we found it extremely
13 difficult to actualize values and beliefs in the real-life context. Using teachers as
14 example, while we advocated for equity, justice, and fairness, in the action process, we
15 easily violated such principles and became dominated in the decision-making processes.
16 While we were educating the villagers to exercise gender equality, some of the male
17 students and teachers could be exhibiting chauvinistic behaviours towards their female
18 colleagues which had caused much embarrassment and unhappiness.
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29 The establishment of practicum sites and the project's development require support
30 from the local government. We must endeavor to include local and provincial officials
31 as partners in the projects, enabling us to leverage government resources and support
32 for the benefit of the local villagers in the long run. However, we had to admit that not
33 all students, especially the younger ones, had such social skills and strong social
34 networks with the government. It was difficult for all of them to establish partnerships
35 with the local government.
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44 Another limitation of our practice was that we had been over-emphasizing on the
45 'social' aspect of development, and not paying adequate attention to the 'economic'
46 and other related aspect of development. As such, we realized that we should strengthen
47 our team by drawing upon the help of economists, agriculturalists, designers, health
48 professionals and others so that we could provide a holistic and inter-disciplinary
49 approach to social development. All these insights generated through the reflection
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5 process had been used to guide the further improvement of the capacity building project
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7 in its subsequent stage of development.

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9 Social work practice is culturally context-specific. This programme has developed
10 a practice model, but we are concerned about its replication limitations, given that our
11 students come from diverse provinces, ethnic minority regions, universities,
12 organisations, and cultural backgrounds. We should not overlook the conditions of
13 every successful model, which include manpower, resources, culture, governmental
14 support, and others.
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23 **Conclusion**

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26 Despite the limitation of the programme, looking in retrospect, we find that the original
27 intended goals of our MSW (China) programme have been effectively achieved through
28 the unrelenting commitment and the collective effort of all educators, students, service-
29 users, and stakeholders involved. The case study has demonstrated that the approach
30 was initially piloted at a fieldwork practicum site in Yunnan Province and was, to a
31 certain extent, replicated and consolidated in disaster reconstruction projects after the
32 Sichuan earthquake and sustainable livelihood community development projects in
33 Guangdong and Henan Provinces. Grounded on the transformative education ethos and
34 using PAR as our teaching and learning pedagogy, the programme has nurtured a
35 critical mass of educators and practitioners who are committed to serving people at the
36 grassroots; competent in practice; critically reflective; trust in democratic participation;
37 and keen in contributing to capacity building and indigenization of social work practice
38 in the Chinese context.
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54 Above all, we are proud that they have the courage, wisdom and sense of mission
55 to foster positive social transformation through education, research and practice at all
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5 levels. Looking towards the future, our team, including our graduates and associates,
6
7 are keen to share our experience in using transformative education and PAR in
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9 Mainland China with friends in other parts of the world. In fact, we have already started
10
11 to build networks with social work communities in many countries, especially with
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13 countries along the new Silk Road with whom we share many similarities in history,
14
15 culture, and social conditions. Capacity building workshops, and PAR projects using
16
17 the concepts and models presented above are being planned in collaboration with social
18
19 work educators and practitioners from different countries including Vietnam, Thailand,
20
21 and Kazakhstan. We believe in the catalyst power of social work education and we hope
22
23 to build a cross-border social work network consisting of like-minded social work
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25 educators and practitioners who will become a critical mass to steer transformative
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27 social work education and practice and to foster collaboration, partnership,
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29 reconciliation and harmony in the region.
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