

Chapter 13

The role of cultural diversity
in sustainable development:
a case study of three villages
in Shaanxi province

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Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between cultural diversity and sustainable development. Culture and cultural diversity have been acknowledged as an intrinsic part of sustainable development, and can be studied fruitfully in rural areas of China. With urbanisation proceeding at unprecedented rate, the rural culture is being torn between traditional and modern values, beliefs and practices. Our study explored five pathways by which traditional rural culture relates to modern culture (essentialising, alternating, converting, hybridising and innovating) in three cases studies in the villages of Dong He, Dai Jia and Chi Niu Wa in the Shaanxi province of China. Detailed information was obtained using interviews and field observations. We concluded that instead of a monolithic shift to modernity, multiple pathways are being followed. This offers new outlooks for the challenge of sustainable development.

13.1 Cultural diversity and sustainable development

Culture is possibly the most difficult word in English to define (Schech & Haggis 2000), and the definition of culture differs between places and among individuals (Daskon, 2010). In the field of anthropology, the basic assumption of cultural studies has changed profoundly. Some decades ago, Wallace concluded that the majority of anthropologists saw cultural knowledge as the replication of uniformity and assumed that people shared the values and practices of their specific social community (Wallace, 1970). Today, the prevalent assumption among anthropologists is that culture is constructed by a variety of small events (Weisner, 2009). The basic assumption, inspired by Clifford Geertz, is that culture is active and can be changed by any small event (Geertz, 1973).

Sustainable development is closely intertwined with cultural diversity all over the world, and major cultural changes may generate a paradigm shift towards sustainable development (Hivaki, 2012). Cultures change as a result of exchanges, conflicts, and innovation in human society, reinforcing cultural diversity (Montuori 2010). In particular, the change from traditional to modern conditions has put pressure on cultures to change. Chan (2002, 2005) studied the dynamics of the “cultural contact” and proposed five possible pathways, called essentialising, alternating, converting, hybridising, and innovating. Chan used this to examine cultural contacts and cosmopolitanism from the basic viewpoint of transnationalism (Chan 2002). In this chapter, we continue this line of research and examine the tensions and opportunities of traditional culture and modern culture at the village community level in China. Tradition is the past of humans, forming gradually in their social life and mind throughout their lives (Luo 2006). However, with the rapid modernisation and urbanisation of China, economic development is becoming the main paradigm of the social value system.

Cultural diversity also reflects human nature in terms of biodiversity (Rio de Janeiro, 1992). Since humans belong to the category of living creatures, one may argue that human cultural diversity is embedded in the overall biodiversity system (Liu 2011). The extinction of several species has raised the level of interest in the protection of biodiversity. However, it is difficult to draw up a clear definition of diversity, due to the intrinsic and implicit value of diversity (Heyd, 2010), and this also holds for cultural diversity. A culture may be seen as representing a particular type of gene which is helpful for the potential development of the world (Zheng 2005). The loss of traditional cultures will increase the risk of environmental and ecological problems (Ausable 1994, p211). It is clear that the preservation of cultural diversity and the protection of traditional lifestyles have a beneficial effect on maintaining the balance between humanity and nature (Liu 2011).

The role of cultural diversity in sustainable development is complex, intricate, and ambiguous. Since sustainable development links society, economy, and ecology (Baker, 2006) in a systemic and complex way, we argue that the cultural dimension is also one

of the most pivotal factors in sustainable development, which will directly and indirectly decide whether sustainable development can be achieved. The cultural dimension is a “missing pillar” and should be more effectively incorporated in the sustainable development discourse (Burfort et.al. 2013). After all, sustainable development is not just a political or economic topic. We are challenged to change our thinking, our practices, and our beliefs (Pan, 2008). Various studies have explored sustainable development from the perspective of economic development or from the perspective of government (Ma, 2009), but there is less literature available about the *culture* of sustainable development. This chapter addresses the cultural aspect of the process of sustainable development, and seeks to integrate culture theory and sustainable development in the context of agriculture.

13.2 Case study: three villages in Shaanxi province

Villages use most of their traditional knowledge, traditional customs and rites, traditional ideas of relationship, and traditional inner world to satisfy their daily needs (Daskon 2010). Because of the rapid urbanisation, modern culture coexists with traditional rural culture in the rural community. This allows us to consider the relationship between cultural diversity and conservation at the level of local or indigenous communities (Brosius and Hitchner 2010). Our research project studied the cultural diversity in three villages in Shaanxi province at the community level: Chi Niu Wa, Dai Jia, and Dong He.

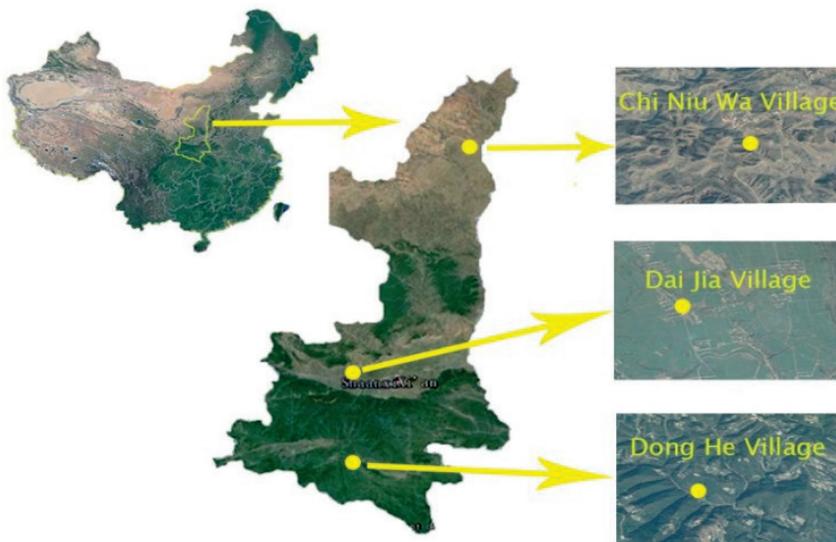


Figure 13.1 The location of three case-study villages in Shaanxi province

Shaanxi province is the cradle of Chinese agricultural culture. In terms of geographic characteristics, the province is divided into three parts (see Figure 13.1): the northern Shaanxi Loess Plateau, the Guanzhong plains (central part of Shaanxi), and the southern Shaanxi Qinling Mountains. The significantly different topographic conditions mean that farming activities differ between these three parts. Hence, we selected three villages from different parts of the province as case studies: Chi Niu Wa, Dai Jia and Dong He. We examined how the unprecedented urbanisation and modernisation led to each of these places having their own distinct way to adapt to the changes in society. Detailed information was obtained using interviews and field observations.

The most significant similarity between these three villages is the popular phenomenon of villagers becoming migrant workers working outside the villages in cities and urban areas. According to the Chinese national bureau of statistics (2012), China's urbanisation rate increased rapidly from 21% in 1982 to 52.7% in 2012. At national level, the trend among farm labour is towards old and female; while the migrant workers are young and male (see Table 13.1). In addition, the agricultural labour structure changed profoundly in all three villages. In traditional China, the characteristic of Chinese rural life is "man ploughing and woman weaving" (Fei, 1939), which has now been replaced by "man working elsewhere and woman farming in the village". There are several causes of these extremely significant changes. First, the development of agricultural science and technology has reduced the involvement of human labour. The net time spent on agricultural work has been reduced from 8 (Fei, 1939) months to 2 or 3 months a year (information from our field research in three villages). Before 1978 (the time of China's reform and opening-up), qualified male labourers were land-bound and engaged in physically demanding farming activities. However, with the rapid urbanisation, the majority of young people chose to work in cities as migrant workers, to improve the whole family's income, as the net agricultural income was meagre (He, 2013). The identity of qualified young rural labours thus changed from farmers to urban migrant workers, while unqualified labourers stayed in the village to do agricultural jobs. In previous times, agriculture was the core task of a farmer and the pivot of their attention; now, rural household income is mainly derived from villagers working in cities as migrant workers.

Table 13.1 Gender and age of agricultural labour and urban migrant labour in China

Percentage	Agricultural farmers (348.7 million)	Migrant workers (131.8 million)
Gender		
Male	46.8%	64%
Female	53.2%	36%
Age		
Below 20	5.3%	16.1%
21-30	14.9%	36.5%
31-40	24.2%	29.5%
41-50	23.1%	12.8%
Above 50	32.5%	5.1%

(Source: Chinese Second Agricultural Census¹² 2006 and data collected by the first author)

In all three villages, intergenerational income is the crucial component of rural income (see Table 13.2), reflecting the difference between the old generation doing farming work in rural villages and the young generation working in urban areas (He, 2013). Young male adults work in cities, while children, women and old people stay in rural areas. With the rapid urbanisation, the rural culture is torn between traditional and modern values, beliefs, and practices.

Table 13.2 Village population and urban migrant workers in three villages

Village	Village population	Households	Migrant workers (approximate)
Dong He village	1730	453	300
Dai Jia village	1367	321	210
Chi Niu Wa village	1008	254	120

13.3 Five pathways in three villages

All three villages we studied are marked by major tensions between traditional and modern cultures. Yet, their coping strategies are not necessarily the same. To explore possible differences we use the framework proposed by Chan (2002), who distinguished a departure culture and an arrival culture to formulate different pathways for each of these two (Chan 2002). By delineating pathways of culture contact, we examined various forms of tension between modern culture (M) and traditional culture (T) at the level of rural communities, thereby assessing the opportunities and risks for sustainable development. In each village, multiple pathways are being used, instead of a monolithic

¹² The first and second agricultural censuses were carried out in 1996 and 2006, respectively.

shift to modernity. Below we introduce the five pathways and discuss how they relate to our three villages.

Essentialising (T+M=T)

In the first pathway, local villagers identify closely with their traditional conventions, religious beliefs, moral values, and rites. Farmers insist on their own identity symbols and resist the invasion of modern culture, externally and internally. Therefore, although urbanisation and modernisation are continuing apace, people raise their inherent awareness of conserving the intrinsic value of traditional culture without being impacted by powerful modern cultural attributes. Despite the penetration of modern culture, the norm for traditional culture is gradually essentialised and continues to play a crucial role in local farmers' daily lives.

Although China is now rapidly becoming urbanised, some traditional values also play pivotal roles in guiding farmers' decisions. For instance, people's commitment to the collective is deeply rooted in all three villages, which means that the interest of the family as a whole dominates over each individual's interests. The young and old generations support each other in the interest of the whole family. In addition, indigenous knowledge is recognised and maintained. For example, in Dong He village, indigenous ecological knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. Specifically, the organic rice project in Dong He village is constructed under the guidance of the traditional system of "rice-duck mutualism" "Rice-duck mutualism" originated around 400 years ago (at the end of the Ming Dynasty or the beginning of the Qing Dynasty), and aimed to develop the multifunctionality of a paddy field. In Chi Niu Wa village, local villagers built their own folk museum to record traditional and vanishing farming culture, to tell and educate people about what worked in the past.

Alternating (T+M = T/M)

The second pathway is to alternate modern and traditional culture. The migrant workers, for instance, are working in urban areas and experience modern culture in the cities, while their collective traditional culture also influences their attitudes and behaviours. Peasant farmers working as migrant workers in cities and urban areas see their rural home as their "root" and intend to return there in the future. Thus, to some degree, both modern values (working outside the village, money-oriented values) and traditional culture (family or local code of traditional values and indigenous knowledge) are internalised in peasants' lives, and their roles alternate during their lives.

Converting ($T+M = M$)

In this pathway, modern culture appears as a dominant force, and modern values dominate the value paradigm globally, resulting in a tendency for local communities to lose and shift their identities. Traditional culture assimilates with modern culture, but modern culture is so strong that it replaces traditional norms and values. As Chan illustrated, people will bury their “old self” (Chan 2002) and pursue their values in life within the context of modern culture.

In Dong He village, farmers currently do not want their children to be farmers and live in rural areas. And most young farmers (i.e., those aged between 20 and 40 years, as well as male farmers under 50 years old) choose to work in cities to increase the household income. In addition, money orientation dominates farmers’ values and behaviour. In order to improve their crop yields, farmers in all three villages are becoming more and more dependent on chemical products (fertilisers and pesticides). In Dai Jia village, the majority of farming activities are carried out by machines, replacing manpower. For instance, local farmers use agricultural machines to sow, perform rotary tillage, and harvest. In addition, there have also been changes in the farmers’ values in life. For instance, in Chi Niu Wa village, all interviewees expressed their support for building the local folk museum because this would increase their income. Monetary value plays a pivotal role in the farmers’ views and behaviours. Local farmers thus emphasise the instrumental value and echo the modern view that acquiring money is an end in itself (Simmel 1978[1900]).

Hybridising ($T+M = TM$)

In a fourth pathway, new hybrid arrangements emerge. To support their local communities, young adults (i.e. those between 20 and 40 years old and male farmers under 50 years old) choose to work outside the village to help sustain the expenditures of the whole household. Migrant workers are typically profoundly affected by modern culture. There will be tensions between people who insist on traditional values and people who embrace the idea that modern culture is more advanced. The conflict is inevitable, and the collision will initially be severe. However, as daily life continues in rural communities, there will be some common ground where these two types of culture coexist. Hybridisation is not without its problems; there are risks of problems regarding social order and integration, such as suicides and gambling (He, 2013), as the new cultural order has not been comprehensively established, while the old cultural order is no longer effective (He, 2013).

Innovation (T+M = NC new culture)

The final pathway relates to the possibility of innovation. Traditional culture and modern culture are interdependent and interact with each other, deciding farmers' rural lives and the development of local communities. Local villagers will evaluate their behaviours from the perspectives of both traditional culture and modern culture, thereby drawing lessons and ideas from both cultures to solve problems in this changing society. For example, indigenous ecological knowledge is needed to limit the dominance of "economic growth" behaviour, while modern knowledge can provide scientific guidance to traditional agricultural production. This results in a type of innovative culture that integrates traditional local culture and modern culture, and solves problems in a changing society. In Dong He village, for instance, there is an organic farming project organised by the government, guided by experts and implemented by local farmers, which integrates indigenous agricultural knowledge ("rice-duck mutualism") and scientific knowledge (such as an insect killing lamp).

13.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have examined the relationship between the diversity of rural culture and sustainable development in rural areas in China. We have argued that there are multiple pathways from traditional culture to modernity, each with their own opportunities and pitfalls. We have thus outlined a dynamic that differs from that of a singular, monolithic transition. The five pathways that we investigated in three villages in Shaanxi province echo the basic tension that Max Weber recognised between two opposite modes of action: "*wert*-rational and *zweck*-rational". *Wert*-rational refers to a value-driven mode of action, in which actions are decided by cultural beliefs such as ethics or religion; *zweck*-rational means goal-oriented and instrumental action, utilitarianism, and a means-to-ends rationality (Smith 2001). Our case studies show that the two may merge in various ways. Together, the five pathways show that cultural diversity in general, and the ways to integrate traditional and modern cultures, are crucial for farmers in their efforts to adapt to a society in transition. Cultural diversity is thus an important condition to address the many challenges of rural sustainable development.

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