

In search of strategies for rural revitalisation in China: Puhan's approach to sustainable community development

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Abstract

Despite the central government's rural reconstruction program targeting rural villages, rural communities in contemporary China continue to face massive social, economic, and environmental challenges. This paper reports on a case study of a farmers' cooperative in Puhan. Continual rural decline, alongside national economic reform and rural community development provide the context for the case study. Well known to rural community development scholars in China, the Puhan cooperative represents an island of rural revitalisation in a sea of rural decline. The paper begins with a discussion of the background to the study, the research design and objectives, and participatory observation method employed. Thereafter, it discusses sustainable community development and provides an analysis of the way in which the community development approach facilitates the attainment of sustainable development goals generally and in Puhan in particular. Focusing on the broader context of rural development in the context of national top-down policy-driven change, it examines the Puhan cooperative's contribution to rural revitalisation and the strengths and challenges encountered, given its adoption of bottom-up, grassroots community development. By outlining the lessons learnt from this case study research, the paper aims to enrich knowledge on the community development approach, sustainable community development, and rural revitalisation in contemporary China.

Over the last three decades, China has pursued policy-driven economic reforms to position the country as a key player on the global stage (Saunders & Shang, 2001). Building a moderately prosperous society by 2021 became the main driver to meet ‘people’s increasing needs for a better life’ (*Xinhua News*, 2017b). Many cities, especially in Eastern China, achieved economic prosperity for urban residents by boosting incomes, public services, and infrastructural development (Gao & Yan, 2015). However, the situation in rural areas was quite different. Despite the central government’s rural reconstruction program targeting rural villages, agriculture’s contribution to the Gross Domestic Product steadily declined and rural farmers were unable to support their families (Tsui et al., 2017). Ongoing rural decline, alongside national economic reform and rural community development, provide the context for the case study. The paper begins by discussing rural challenges, policy responses, and development failures before outlining the case study research that informs the analysis of one farmers’ cooperative’s attempt at sustainable community development. Thereafter, it discusses the strengths and challenges encountered, and lessons learnt, to enrich knowledge on community development’s potential for rural revitalisation.

Background to the study: Challenges in rural China

Rural challenges

The unbalanced focus on economic reform led to income disparities between rural and urban China, widened the gap between the urban rich and rural poor, and intensified uneven rural-urban development (Leung, 2007; Long et al., 2011; Meng et al., 2019). Rural communities

made substantial sacrifices for China's fast-paced urban development and modernisation, generating a pool of economically active able-bodied labour, while saddled with a complex amalgam of environmental, economic, and social problems. These included:

- *Environmental* degradation through *inter alia* air and water pollution; a loss of biodiversity and arable farmland, due to overgrazing and unsustainable land use; disappearing wetlands; invasive species; degraded grassland; increased desertification; depleted fisheries; interrupted river flows and water shortages; soil erosion; waste accumulation; and frequent, large-scale human-induced natural disasters (Liu, 2018).
- Disruption of the *economic* fabric through massive farmland appropriation, the depletion of arable land, loss of rural settlements, impaired food security, and diminished farmland protection (Liu, 2018).
- A fragmenting *social* structure threatened the wellbeing of rural communities as the outflow of young workers led to hollowed-out villages, leaving large low-skilled populations comprising left-behind groups. These included children, women, and older people, who sustained themselves with minimal social security and limited social services (Liu, 2018; Meng et al., 2022).

Policy responses

In response to these challenges, from 2004 onwards, the government introduced a series of progressive policy changes focused on three rural issues: Agriculture, rural areas, and farmers

(Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee & State Council, 2004; Wang & Zhou, 2018). In March 2006, the National People's Congress announced the central government's plan to build a new socialist countryside (CPC Central Committee & State Council, 2006). Renamed rural revitalisation in 2017, this policy brought increased spending on rural development and economic transfers to the rural poor through public goods provision and funding for county-level divisions, of which there were 2,862, situated three levels below the centre, above the township and village (Ahlers & Schubert, 2009; Liu & Wu, 2020; Tristan, 2018). Between 2003 and 2012, the government invested more than six trillion yuan (USD 0.83 trillion) to improve rural infrastructure and living standards (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), 2012). However, this economic investment did not reverse rural decay (Chen, 2010; Tsui et al., 2017). Commentators saw rural top-down, investor-oriented programs reliant on excessive government control as unproductive, because they overlooked the real needs, creativity, and ingenuity of rural communities (Clegg, 2006; Li et al., 2016; Thøgersen, 2009; Wu & Liu, 2020). Ahlers and Schubert (2009) believed the government had offered 'an intentionally vague but holistic policy framework ... to be adapted to local conditions' (p. 57). Its goal was the 'comprehensive transformation of the Chinese countryside' (p. 57), which would see poor villages slowly disappear, commercialised agriculture prevail, and 'rural surplus labour gradually absorbed by the urban industrial and service sectors' (Ahlers & Schubert, 2009, p. 57). In short, rural areas remained spaces for diverse interpretations and county level practices (Wu & Liu, 2020).

Following the 2017 report to the 19th National Congress of the CPC, the central government's 2018 No. 1 Document announced a 'new era' for rural revitalisation – *xiang cun zhen xing* – as China faced 'the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life' (*Xinhua News*, 2017b). As Wang and Zhou (2018) explained, rural revitalisation aimed to:

Maintain the priority of rural development, establish a sound urban-rural integration development system and policy system, and accelerate the modernization of rural areas in accordance with the general requirements of industrial prosperity, ecological livability, rural civilization, effective governance, and affluent life (p. 7).

This new-era policy dovetailed with the central government's 'two centenary' targets: (i) Establishing a moderately prosperous society to achieve prosperity for all by the CPC's centenary in 2021, and (ii) building a modern prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious socialist country by the People's Republic of China's (PRC) centenary in 2049 (*Xinhua News*, 2017a).

A vital area of rural reform was land use and management, since all agricultural land was collectively-owned, with the administrative village entitled to collective ownership of rural land, that is, the right to own, use, benefit from, and dispose of land (Kuhn, 2019; Liu, 2018). The 2018 land reforms included the extension of rural contract land leases for another 30 years; legalisation for rural contract land-management rights; separation of the Three Powers – ownership, contract, and management rights, though the right of ownership was the dominant

power; and a shift towards a land-circulation regime (Kuhn, 2019; Tristan, 2018). Thus, Wu and Liu (2020) described rural revitalisation ‘as a process of the interaction between land transfer and community building’ (p. 3).

Rural development failures

The labour exodus and scarcity of social services hindered sustainable rural development initiatives, because, more than top-down policy-driven monetary investment and profit-sharing schemes, rural China needed a socially and culturally focused model of capacity- and ‘community-building’ (Wu & Liu, 2020), to revitalise communities and enhance local resilience against urbanisation. This was not new to China. As Thøgersen (2009) noted, Chinese officials and social activists experimenting with rural transformation ‘often drew on discourses dating back to the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which saw urban intellectuals making similar efforts to modernize the villages and their inhabitants’ (p. 9). Then, as now, the central state remained the major player implementing traditional top-down procedures perceived as unproductive for micro-level community building. Hence, to progress their agenda, state actors had to ‘find allies among village elites and social activists’ (Thøgersen, 2009, p. 9). Among them was Liang Shuming, who, as Day (2008) noted, in the 1920s ‘promoted a Confucian form of activism in which intellectuals went to the countryside to rebuild rural society’ (p. 59). Another was Yan Yangchu, ‘whose rural reconstruction ideas developed out of his work in mass education ... in the 1930s’ (Day, 2008, p. 59). These extensive experimentations in rural reconstruction included the development of village schools

and farmer associations, cooperatives and small-scale industries, and innovative agricultural technologies (Liang, 2006; Tsui & Wong, 2013). Given social arrangements based on land ownership in the Asian mode of production had ignited debates about the transformation of the peasantry, over the years, China's rural reconstruction movements have sought 'an integration of peasant agriculture, household industry, and village community' (Tsui & Wong, 2013, p. 57). Some scholars have argued that this was the origin of community development in rural China (Liang, 2006; Tsui & Wong, 2013). Hence, there was some consensus that rural transformation hinged on strengthening community resilience by improving small-scale agricultural development, rebuilding social solidarity, reactivating traditional village culture, improving village governance, and rethinking the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Liang, 2006; Tsui & Wong, 2013; Tsui et al., 2017). This historical experience suggested a sustainable community development approach that addressed the sociocultural and environmental impacts of economic reform (He & Grober, 2003; Leung, 2007; Liu, 2018; Long et al., 2011; Meng et al., 2019; Song et al., 2012; Tsui & Wong, 2013; Tsui et al., 2017; Wu & Liu, 2020). Yet, the government continued to pursue top-down, planned economic development, despite continual claims that the way forward lay in strengthening local community resilience in rural China; that is, it lay in sustainable community development (Ku & Kan, 2020; Tsui et al., 2017).

Research study

Conceptualisation of the study

As already noted, the economic reform program prioritised economic growth that led to uneven development and a widening urban-rural gap (Tsui & Wong, 2013). In response, from 2000 onwards, the Chinese government introduced policies to abolish agricultural taxes, establish rural cooperative medical insurance systems, exempt families from educational fees in the poor Western regions, and increase investment in public services in rural China (Tsui & Wong, 2013). From building a new socialist countryside to rural revitalisation, its aim was to improve rural livelihoods, build liveable rural environments, and promote rural development through large-scale investment in rural infrastructure and welfare systems (Tsui & Wong, 2013). The Cooperative Law enacted in 2007 aimed to stimulate the rural economy through productive agricultural development, part of which involved supporting local farmers' organisations to form cooperatives as vehicles for economic collaboration (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 2007). Consequently, most farmers' cooperatives provided one or two services relating to inputs, such as agricultural technology training, credit provision, and the marketing of agricultural materials, including the supply of fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, and fodder, to farmers and outputs, such as agricultural products (Deng et al., 2010). However, out of keeping with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), successive policies highlighted economic over social and environmental goals (Song et al., 2014) and it was unlikely that farmers' cooperatives could sustain themselves without government support (Deng et al.,

2010). The SDGs suggested that addressing complex rural challenges and developing sustainable livelihoods and liveable rural environments required more than economic investment. Sustainable development called for a holistic, multidimensional approach that addressed social, environmental, and economic issues arising from social transformation and agricultural modernisation, especially the mass exodus of young rural labour and dire poverty of vulnerable left-behind groups (Tsui et al., 2017). Hence, this research sought to study a successful community's farmers' cooperative to ascertain how community development might harness local initiative and contribute to sustainable – social, economic, and environmental – development. It sought to identify the strengths and challenges of Puhan's approach through participant observation and feedback. Since there was a great deal of publicly available information on the cooperative and its leader, it sought to canvass the views of local people and their direct experience of participatory community development.

Research design and objectives

The study used an exploratory, qualitative case study approach of the Puhan farmers' cooperative in Yongji city. The predecessor to the Puhan farmers' cooperative was the peasant association in Puzhou town in Yongji city, formed in 2004, which, over a period of five years, had achieved encouraging results in improving villagers' quality of life by promoting social harmony and economic development (Tang, 2010). Puhan had extended these gains by becoming a multifunctional cooperative, comprising 3,865 households (about 25,800 farmers) from 43 villages in the townships of Puzhou and Hanyang, reaching 58% of the local farming

population. Differed from other farmers' cooperatives *vis a vis* economic activity for profit, Puhan aimed to address the adverse impacts of industrial, urban expansion on rural communities. Thus, it provided the potential to study key aspects of holistic sustainable community development to address complex social, economic, and environmental challenges facing rural residents.

Yin (2009) described a case study as 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and contexts are not clearly evident' (p. 18). The case study approach aimed to examine a 'bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observation, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes' (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). This case study examined the underlying principles of sustainable community development undergirding a farmers' cooperative and explored the way in which it was responding to local needs in rural Puhan.

Research methodology

The research used three data collection methods: Participatory observation, interviews, and secondary data analysis. Living in close proximity and sharing an office with Puhan's workers for three months in 2017 facilitated participatory observation, as it enabled the researcher to observe the workers' activities first hand and to gain the trust of potential interview participants. The researcher deliberately used the term 'participatory observation' rather than 'participant

observation', as his role of observing participant activity did not involve direct participation in what they were doing. Thus, he was an objective observer immersed in the workers' daily work environment. The researcher informed participants as to the reason for his presence in Puhan and none objected to his observation of their activities, with many engaging in informal discussions with him. In this way, the researcher established contact with 46 of Puhan's 113 staff members, 18 of whom worked directly with local farmers, visiting them to evaluate their needs, launch community projects, and obtain feedback. This limited the potential interview sample, as the researcher only invited participants whom he had met (n=46) to participate in semi-structured interviews. Fifteen participants agreed to an interview; all were indigenous workers and local farmers. The researcher informed the participants that they could withdraw from the interview without undue consequences. He ensured that they understood the purpose of the interview and assured participants of their anonymity. Questions varied for each respondent based on their role in Puhan. The researcher explored: (i) the initiatives in which they were involved; (ii) approaches to sustainable community development; (iii) the projects they had organised; and (iv) the way in which they had done this. The researcher audio-recorded the interviews and anonymised the interview transcripts; only one participant did not agree to recording and two did not complete the interview. The researcher transcribed the recorded interviews (n=15) and fieldnotes of his participatory observations. He also studied secondary documents, including Puhan's regulations, brochures, and news reports, provided by Puhan's staff as complementary texts for analysis. He employed a qualitative approach to data analysis beginning with open coding following a close reading of the interview transcripts,

fieldnotes, and Puhan documents (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). He repeated this process several times before coding the data and generating preliminary categories, grouped according to the projects described. He then grouped these preliminary categories into themes in keeping with the picture of Puhan's activities the data depicted. Observing a pattern matching the main dimensions of sustainable community development, the researcher reached the final themes of: (i) economic development, (ii) sociocultural continuity, (iii) environmental sustainability, and (iv) integrated community development. These informed the findings of the study, discussed below. Overall, the secondary and interview data revealed a great deal of positivity among the participants, who provided highly descriptive accounts of their work with little critical assessment of Puhan's activities.

As an acquaintance society, it was difficult for outsiders to enter rural communities and conduct fieldwork without an introduction from, and support of, a key person within the community. The researcher had visited Puhan during his Masters study and, since then, had maintained personal contact with Puhan's director, who served as an intermediary and helped him recruit participants for interviewing. With the director's assistance, the researcher was able to follow the daily work of Puhan's community project leaders and attend the training program for new community workers. The researcher kept fieldnotes of his activities and observations to supplement the interview data. He, nevertheless, encountered practical obstacles and ethical dilemmas during the ethnographic fieldwork. First, he had only three months in which to complete data collection in Puhan. Therefore, it was not possible to establish contact, build trust with, and interview, all the Puhan staff. However, he was able to interview 15 community

workers during his short stay, including Puhan's founder. Secondly, the researcher found that Western research ethics guidelines that required participants to sign an informed consent form and audio record the interview inappropriate when conducting this study (Adu-Gyamfi, 2015). Most residents in rural communities in China had never been audio recorded or been asked to sign an informed consent form. Thus, the researcher gained verbal consent from the 15 participants.

Puhan's contribution to sustainable community development

Meaning of 'community'

Generally, community development has a social justice orientation and focuses on supporting local people and communities using non-individualist community-based strategies (Gray, 2010; Hugman, 2015; Jones & Truell, 2012). Chinese society, however, was 'egocentric' to the extent that each person was at the centre of his or her own network (Fei et al., 1992). China's collectivism capitalised on individuals' shared interests, embedding strong community values and a long history of communities working together to further shared goals within their geographical locations and kinship relationships. Thus, 'community' in rural China is an administrative amalgam of geographical location and shared interests. Xiaotong (2000) and his fellow students at Yenching University in China translated 'community' as *she qu*, construing it as 'a group of people who live close to one another and work together' (Xiaotong, 2000, p. 23). For Tang and Sun (2017), *she qu* denoted 'a social collective formed by those residing within a defined geographic boundary ... the area under the jurisdiction of the enlarged

residents' committee' (p. 10). *She qu* became the surrogate of *danwei* in the late 1980s. As Meng et al. (2019) explained, *danwei* 'provided for the welfare of employees through work or employment units' (p. 937). All were state controlled. These welfare measures included 'education for the employees' children, healthcare provision, entertainment and social clubs ... Each *danwei* created its own housing, hospitals, kindergartens, schools, shops, canteens, and other services, and played a role in private life events, such as marriages and births' (Meng et al., 2019, p. 937). Ku et al. (2005) noted that an erosion of *danwei* and the functions of families, local communities, and state agents accompanied economic reform in China. While *danwei* was based on work units, *she qu* was based on residential units (under residents' committees) tasked with undertaking urban governance; residents' committees were legitimate local organisations in urban areas. In rural areas, village committees were grassroots autonomous organisations within administrative villages; they took on a quasi-governmental role. Both, however, fell within the jurisdiction of the county-level government.

Based on this historical understanding, 'community' in rural China denotes a unique political and sociocultural milieu of 'webs woven out of countless personal relationships' (Fei et al., 1992, p. 78) bound by consanguineous, geographic, and occupational ties. Fei et al. (1992) described these hierarchical social relationships based on association as *cha xu ge ju*, metaphorically representing straws forming a haystack in Western society and ripples from a rock thrown into water in Chinese society: They comprise 'overlapping networks of people linked together throughout differentially categorized social relationships' (Fei et al., 1992, p. 20). The Western mode of association presupposed individual autonomy, while the Chinese

mode of association nested within a highly structured society built on collectivism that presupposed ‘multiple linkages of self with others and a categorization of those linkages’ (Fei et al., 1992, p. 21). The Confucianism embedded in Chinese society provided the sociocultural foundation for social relationships rooted in a set of virtues that facilitated a sense of community. These virtues were compassion (*ren*), reciprocity (*shu*), loyalty (*zhong*), wisdom (*zhi*), courage (*yong*), trustworthiness (*xin*), reverence (*jing*), and filial piety (*xiao*) (Ang, 2009). They were the glue of social and community life ‘maintaining cohesion and harmony of the social group at every level’ (Ang, 2009, p. 111). This normative virtue-based value orientation plays a pivotal role in rural China, where each interpersonal tie requires prescribed ritualistic (*li*) behaviours to maintain relationships based on the norms of reciprocity and personal obligation. These performative norms undergird ‘subordinate dyadic relationship: obligations of the child to the parent, the wife to the husband, the official to the ruler, and the younger to the older’ (Fei et al., 1992, p. 22). Despite modernisation, traditional Confucian morality has a major hold on personal and social conduct. In the Puhon case study, community denoted a social structure of intertwined social relationships, heavily influenced by kinship ties and culturally prescribed roles. As well as a network of social relations, ‘community’ denoted a structure comprising potential resources, most notably natural resources, human capacity, social capital, and community alliances.

Dimensions of sustainable community development

An important issue for rural revitalisation was how to strengthen community resilience. Puhan involved bottom-up community development with an emphasis on community participation, capacity building, and the use of local knowledge and resources. Local farmers played an essential role in decision-making and implementation processes by choosing their own goals and devising strategies for achieving sustainable community development. Running against the tide of modernisation bringing productive agriculture to rural communities, Puhan's approach focused on the three pillars of sustainable community development:

1. Economic development
2. Sociocultural continuity
3. Environmental sustainability

Economic development

Puhan focused directly on rural challenges in targeting left-behind local rural women, who constituted the backbone of rural society. Its community development approach employed a train-the-trainer model whereby experienced workers trained new recruits in community work. Community workers maintained close contact with farming household members (n=3,865) through home and field visits. The model followed a rational needs-based procedure: get to know local households; conduct a 'household survey' to analyse household needs; establish a service plan; provide the needed service; follow up the project; and get feedback. Most were local villagers embedded in local social networks. Hence, local households saw them not only

as Puhan employees but also as friends, neighbours, and kin, in some instances. This facilitated communication in their work with Puhan's farmers' cooperatives.

Although 130 farmers' cooperatives in 20 villages had formed with the 2006 policy change, 80% were inactive, as the government had not supported local farmers' agricultural production; they existed only in name to qualify for the government subsidy (Banyuetan, 2018). Puhan organised 28 farmers' cooperatives, though six refused to continue without external financial support. This ran counter to Puhan's belief that government support increased dependency and compromise self-development. Puhan's goal of self-sustaining development and economies of scale rested on local initiative. In 2012, 22 small farmers' organisations amalgamated into two large cooperatives comprising 3,856 households in 43 villages over 12 areas of operation. Related developments included a farmer school, fruit association, and two retail stores in Yongji and Yuncheng city for collective sales following farmers' reports that they did not know how to bargain with brokers when selling their agricultural products at the market. The Puhan staff collected agricultural products from farmers and sold them to their customers in cities; they connected producers in rural communities with consumers in urban areas to avoid brokers' profiteering at the farmers' expense and to minimise price fluctuations by sharing risks among local households. From 2012 onwards, Puhan also provided collective purchasing for local farming households. Local households placed monthly orders with Puhan staff, who compiled, purchased, and delivered the goods, including toiletries, vegetables and fruit, grains and oil, meat, and home appliances. Collective commodity purchases led to economies of scale, providing better-priced, superior quality household consumption goods.

Given the difficulties in borrowing money in rural China, Puhan launched a micro-loan project with support from a charity foundation in September 2012. It supplemented the fund from charity donations, the sale of agricultural produce, and householders' share capital. It kept interest rates low, providing small interest-free loans to the poorest, most vulnerable people in the village. Puhan's collective strategy transformed household troubles into a community responsibility, with local households sharing risks in keeping with Confucian values by building social solidarity through community organisation and resource sharing. Every local farmer and household were simultaneously potential helpers and recipients in Puhan,

Sociocultural continuity

Most rural women in China were involved in farm work, household management, and child and elder care (Meng et al., 2019). Few had time to engage in leisure activities. Many were caring for their grandchildren. There were 2,492 children and young people under the age of 18 years and more than 1,700 people over the age of 60 years, of whom about 600 children and 594 older people were 'left-behind' by their families working in the city. To take care of these people, from 2014 onwards, Puhan established 10 preschool education centres throughout the region, renting houses from local households and rebuilding them as kindergarten classrooms. It also organised community-based care service, rebuilding 14 unoccupied houses and training local farmers as child carers. It employed two paid workers and a volunteer for each child-care centre, supported by volunteers from the village assisting on one day a month.

Puhan had started small in 2004, organising six dance groups and inviting instructors to teach women to dance. This was an entirely new phenomenon in this traditional rural village and led to sarcastic comments from some residents, who thought dancing in public areas was culturally inappropriate for rural women. Within a month, more than 100 women had joined a dance class and the classes spread to more than 30 villages. Thus, Puhan grew from small beginnings, focused on a cultural activity that local women enjoyed. This grew to other cultural activities, such as traditional handicrafts, with older handicrafts experts passing on age-old techniques to younger women, thus ensuring the continuity of a cultural heritage. These women's projects led to the Women's Association, which organised learning activities for capacity building and self-development, such as teaching mandarin, engaging in public debate, intervening in family issues, and promoting gender equality to break through patriarchal traditions and advocate mutual respect within the family. Traditional family values of filial piety were highly appreciated in Chinese cultures. Filial piety meant caring for one's parents, especially as they aged, and respecting and obeying parental authority. From these cultural activities, came women's group that later launched Puhan's environmental sustainability projects.

Environmental sustainability

The first environmental projects of the women's association focused on waste removal and road rebuilding. The women taught households to separate garbage for recycling and hired people to transport household waste to landfill sites. After several years, the local government

assumed responsibility for waste removal. The women also formed a road-building committee and mobilised local households to join the road-rebuilding project. Within three months, their village had newly constructed roads. In addition, Puhan's soil-improvement project aimed to restore soil fertility and environmental sustainability, as farmers' overuse of chemical fertilisers had increased environmental pollution and decreased soil quality on their farming lands.

Integrated sustainable community development model

The 'integrated' component joined the three pillars of economic development, sociocultural continuity, and environmental sustainability. The 'developmental' referred to the self-sustaining nature of the community projects, shown in Table 1, while 'sustainable' denoted their attention to the environment, as well as their longevity.

Table 1: Puhan’s integrated sustainable community development projects

Dimension of sustainable community development	Project	Main activity	Area or population involved
Economic development	Agricultural technology training	Invited experts to instruct local households’ farming work	3,865 households
	Agricultural produce sales	Collective sale of agricultural produce	3,865 households
	Collective commodity purchase	Collective purchase of toiletries, vegetables, fruit, grain, oil, meat, and household appliances	3,865 households
	Collective agricultural material purchase	Collectively purchase agricultural material such as pesticides, seeds, and fertilisers	3,865 households
	Microloans	Low-interest microloans of up to 50,000 yuan (USD7000)	+ 1000 households
Sociocultural continuity	Community-based care for older people	Trains local farmers to provide care and provides community activity centres	360 people, including left-behind older people
	Preschool education	Cooperate with preschool institutions to provide kindergarten education	120 children, including left-behind children
	Traditional handicrafts	Passing on traditional handicraft techniques, such as weaving, doubling threading, cutting, and embroidery	265 housewives
Environmental sustainability	Soil improvement	Use of alternatives - manure and organic - material to replace chemical fertilisers	+ 10,000 mu farming land in 43 villages
	Waste removal	Recycling and transportation of household waste to landfill sites	
	Road building	Restoration and construction of roads	

Strengths and challenges encountered by Puhan

Many criticised the government's revitalisation strategy, because of its failure to focus on restoring the social fabric and building resilient local networks (Tsui et al., 2017; Tsui & Wong, 2013). As already outlined, Puhan's adoption of bottom-up community development was intended as a corrective to national top-down policy-driven rural revitalisation. Its multidimensional sustainable community development model was its response to unbalanced development. Nevertheless, agriculture was its major focus, given it mainly involved farmers' cooperatives. Its wellspring was the community values of self-reliance, collectivism, and social solidarity. Its techniques included redistribution, collective action, public participation, and democratic decision-making. Its key objective was strengthening community resilience by transforming household troubles into community responsibilities. Its integrated community development model harnessed community resources, including human capacity, material resources, support networks, and social capital, initially to provide self-development, advancement, and employment opportunities for women with low skill and literacy levels. Based on cooperative principles, its bottom-up revitalisation initiatives also included sociocultural and environmental projects to support agricultural development.

Puhan followed a community development model that maintained a level of autonomy, rather than a 'wait, rely on and ask the government for help' approach (Tsui et al., 2017). While many saw Puhan's self-reliance as a strength, others might see it as an abrogation of government responsibility, with an ideal approach comprising government-community

partnerships, wherein communities played an important decision-making role to ensure projects addressed local needs. The participants in this case study identified three priorities:

1. Issues related to farming production, including the sale of agricultural products and collective commodity purchases.
2. Children's education and older people's care
3. Access to loans

One of Puhan's key strengths was its responsiveness to locally identified needs. Nevertheless, Puhan's development also encountered challenges. In China, there was lack of policy support for grassroots organisations protecting farmers' interests (Tang, 2010). Grassroots organisations were impermissible without government legitimation. To accord with the 2007 Cooperative Law, Puhan changed its name from Puhan farmers' association to Puhan farmers' cooperative. To avoid conflict with local village committees, Puhan negotiated a clear division of responsibilities and charter for cooperation. Nevertheless, state regulation over non-government organisations tightened. In 2017, a new law mandated overseas non-profit organisations, including those engaged in lending, to submit financial budgets and reports to the Ministry of Public Security (Tsui & Xiaohui, 2020). This led to the withdrawal of loans by the charity foundation from Puhan and hindered the development of its microloan project. Moreover, Puhan's founder and staff lacked experience in operating farmers' cooperatives. Challenges within Puhan included providing the local farmers it employed with the requisite organisational skills and management knowledge, which took time. Hence, Puhan's founder

made a concerted effort to encourage young graduates, who had grown up there, to return with their qualifications in *inter alia* accounting, computer science, human resources management, and marketing. This reflected the modern technological business environment to which cooperatives had to adapt to survive in contemporary rural China.

Conclusion

This case study examined the experiences of a well-known, successful farmers' cooperative in rural China that sought to achieve rural revitalisation through integrated sustainable community development focused on social, economic, and environmental factors. It interrogated how the Puhan cooperative had met the challenges of maintaining a grassroots participatory *modus operandi* in the context of government-driven modernisation steering farming toward industrial production, competition, and increased productivity. The case study showed how Puhan had used cooperative strategies to streamline the marketing and sale of agricultural produce, as well as the means to access goods and materials, not only for productive farming, but also for efficient household management. Puhan understood the importance of social and cultural programs to support economic production and income generation, as well as the protection of the environment to efficient, sustainable farming practices and healthy households. To this end, its projects to counter soil erosion and pollution through efficient waste management and soil enrichment were as important as its marketing, sales, and purchasing initiatives and its care centres for children and older people. It showed that integrated sustainable community

development meant focusing on interrelated social, environmental, and economic factors so revitalised communities could support healthy, active, productive, and happy residents.

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Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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