THE USE OF PHOTO ELICITATION IN RURAL CHINA AS A DATA COLLECTION METHOD

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ABSTRACT

The research described in this paper was conducted as part of a three-year University Affiliations Program funded through Educational and Cultural Affairs Office, US Department of State Department (formerly USIA). The research team from Iowa State University used photo elicitation as a vehicle for conducting interviews with rural peasants in China to determine their top concerns or “care abouts” for the future of their village. The purpose of the was to evaluate the process of using photo elicitation as a research tool and to compare peasant responses and Zhejiang University graduate student and professor responses to the question of the village peasants’ “care abouts.” This research was designed to initiate a dialogue with Zhejiang University regarding the importance of communication between extension agents and villagers in clarifying needs and setting priorities.
Introduction

The current “Reform and Open” policy in China, which commenced in 1977, has resulted in economic growth, mainly for residents of coastal cities. In recent years, there has been evidence that the economic benefits of this policy are also reaching the rural interior provinces (Garnaut, et al., 1996; Zhu 1991). With improved material living conditions in China’s countryside, the national government has been taking steps to foster democratic reform through the implementation of village-level elections for local officials (Kellihner 1997). Furthermore, Chinese President Jiang Jemin indicated in a speech to the 15th Party Congress in 1997 that the next step in the process of democratic reform will be the implementation of free elections at the township and district levels, one notch above the village level. It is under this promising Chinese policy reform that Iowa State University began to collaborate with Zhejiang Agricultural University in Hangzhou, China, (now Zhejiang University, or ZU) to develop an institutional partnership focusing on a rural and agricultural extension system.

Purpose of Research

The research described in this paper focuses on the use of photo elicitation as a vehicle for conducting interviews with rural peasants in China to determine their top concerns or “care abouts” for the future of their village. The purpose of the study is two-fold: (1) to evaluate the process of using photo elicitation as a research tool and (2) to compare peasant responses and ZU graduate student and professor responses to the question of the village peasants’ “care abouts.” This case study is designed to initiate a dialogue with Zhejiang University regarding the importance of communication between extension agents and villagers in clarifying needs and setting priorities.

Methods and Data Sources

Observations regarding an apparent lack of interaction between ZU professors and rural clients in identifying client needs provide the backdrop for a research study that compares the stated needs of one village to the perception of those needs by ZU graduate students and professors. Using McLeod and Chaffee’s co-orientation theory as the basis for determining congruence of thought between the villagers and the university professors/graduate students, two basic questions deserve further study: (1) What do the villagers care about or see as their most pressing needs? (2) What do the professors and graduate students think the villagers care about or see as their most pressing needs?

To obtain a better understanding of congruence of thought among ZU professors, graduate students and rural villagers, a research study was done in a village located in DeQing Prefecture (county) in Zhejiang Province, where 90 percent of the village population is involved in a common enterprise—value-added snakes products such as meat, wines, medicine, and accessories. Snake Village was once marked by extreme poverty, much like other rural villages in China. When the Chinese government opened and encouraged free market trade and the establishment of village enterprises, Snake Village decided to focus on value-added snake products. Rather than continuing its fifteen-year practice of first-level snake processing (raising and selling snakes), the village determined that refined (or value-added) snake processing would, indeed, be more profitable. The largest markets for live snakes are Hangzhou and Shanghai restaurants; while snake venum and organs are processed into medicine and wine. Prices are determined by market forces within China.
(mostly Hangzhou and Shanghai) since the villagers are not yet selling to foreign markets. After engaging in value-added snake production for only four years, Snake Village is now the most successful (profitable) village enterprise in a 23-village area within the county.

Photo Elicitation as a Survey Instrument. A small group of social scientists have used cameras as research tools almost since the formation of anthropology and sociology in the United States. Mead and Bateson (1942) used photography to study and interpret Balinese ritual activities. Collier (1967) suggested that photographs can provide a more efficient analysis of social settings (such as dwellings, poverty, workplace, etc.) than can be obtained using only written descriptions. Collier also described how to use photographs, or “photo elicitation” in an integrated way to obtain information and encourage dialogue that probably would not be possible through conversations focused on written or verbal interviews. The use of photographs allows the interviewer to move from a concrete idea to one that is more socially abstract. Harper describes the process as follows:

In the photo-elicitation interview the informant and the interviewer discuss the photographs giving the interview a concrete point of reference. The researcher gains a phenomenological sense as the informant explains what the objects in the photograph mean, where they have come from, or developed from, and what elements may be missing . . . The individual being interviewed comes to a level of understanding, as would anyone confronted by a photographic study of his or her social world, that probably did not exist prior to the interview. (p. 25)

The focus of discussion becomes the photograph rather than a question posited by the interviewer. The interviewer’s inquiry regarding the photographs will, hopefully, encourage the villagers to become the “teacher” in explaining the images and, in turn, the concerns. Harper points out that “photo elicitation” is not designed to obtain photos that are visually arresting, such as those seen in a documentary. The idea, rather, is to photograph objects through the eyes of the villager, not through the eyes of the interviewer. In this study, after obtaining both verbal and photographic information from the village peasants, the researchers asked a group of graduate students (the future policy makers in China) and professors/extension agents of Zhejiang University to identify what they think the villagers expressed as the top ten concerns or “care abouts” of the village.

Research Activity. Based on discussions with ISU graduate students from Zhejiang Province and a review of Huang’s (1998) case study of Lin Village (China), it was apparent that the success of this experiment--indeed the success of gaining access to the village--depended on following established protocol. With this in mind, the following research process was initiated.

- Explanation of the research project was presented to the director of the ZU International Office (Dr. Fu Yan). The international office staff and ZU professors are well connected within Zhejiang Province officials and sought permission of the mayor of DaQing County to arrange the meetings and conduct the research.

- The researchers spent two days in Snake Village interviewing two segments of the population. The first segment included the leaders of the village enterprise--the Party Secretary of the Township who oversees but does not actively participate in the enterprises of two to three villages in the county, an official from the Science and Technology Committee (a branch of the
Ministry of Agriculture), and the Secretary of the village Communist Party. The researchers asked numerous questions to gain an understanding of Snake Village’s organizational structure, decision-making hierarchy, and its remarkable success during the past few years. The Secretary of the Party for the Village was quite skeptical about the research being conducted at Snake Village. It was his view that the villagers would not have the understanding or skills to take photographs to represent their concerns for the future of the village. The Secretary became more cooperative once he understood that the purpose of the study was not to evaluate responses of the villagers or the success of the village. Rather the purpose was to determine whether or not professors and graduate students (the future policy makers and extension agents of China) at Zhejiang University were aware of the “care abouts” of the rural village community.

- The interviewers met with eight villagers to explain the research project, demonstrated how to use one-step polaroid cameras, and requested that each villager take at least 10 photographs representing their biggest concerns or “care abouts” for the future of Snake Village. Villagers were selected by the Secretary of the Party. While random selection is the preferred method for collecting survey data, the interviewer was not allowed free access to the villagers and had to rely on the village leaders to make the selection.

- Two days later, the researchers met with each villager privately on a one-to-one basis and asked the villager to explain what each photograph represented in terms of his/her “care abouts” for the future of the village. Discussions took place through an interpreter. Six villagers returned to be interviewed regarding their photographs.

- The researchers placed photographs into the following thirteen categories: future of children, education, extended family (parents), transportation, markets, money (increased income), housing/living conditions, environment/water quality, health, drug/alcohol abuse, religion/spirituality, diversification/planning, and friendship (community).

- Upon completing interviews with villagers and categorizing photographs, the researchers instructed the villagers to meet as a group to determine and agree upon the priority order of the categories that represented their “care abouts” for the future of Snake Village.

- After obtaining photographs and completing interviews in the village, the researchers met with a group of graduate students and a group of faculty at ZU who are the future or current academic and extension leaders in rural development. The ZU faculty/graduate student task was to list individually ten things that they thought that the rural villagers in Snake Village “care about” or see as their most pressing needs for the future of the village.

- The researchers reviewed and compared responses for congruency and/or incongruency between the villagers and ZU students/faculty. This will result in a set of recommendations for ZU’s consideration as they fashion not only an extension service that meets the needs of the villagers, but also a new academic major of regional rural development within their department of economics.
Data Summary and Evaluation

Photo Elicitation from Villagers

By far, most of the photographs, 23 in total, represented a desire for increased income. Other “care-about”s included children’s future, housing/living conditions, improved markets to sell goods, systems planning/diversification, community relationships/friendships, transportation systems, health, care of elderly family/parents, and government Party loyalty/commitment.

While 23 of the 55 photographs taken by the villagers easily fit in the category of “increased income,” when asked to place the categories in priority order, the villagers placed “increased income” as fourth in importance following diversification, transportation, and improved markets.

The ISU researchers did not have an opportunity to explore why “planning and diversification” was chosen as the top priority, even though almost half of the photographs submitted indicated “increased income” as a “care about.” It is possible that the translation of the discussions between the villagers and researchers had an impact on the categorization of the photographs. The villagers’ responses passed through both the filter of the translator and the filter of the researchers. The translator, a graduate student in economics and management from Zhejiang University, had never before visited a rural area of China. Her English skills were adequate and she seemed to possess a good knowledge of her area of study. Yet her translation skills were limited and perhaps the villagers’ responses were translated in English simply as “increased income.” It was not the purpose of this study to pursue in depth how the villagers would seek to increase their income. The responses of the villagers through the translator were taken at face value by the researchers.

It is also possible that while the villagers’ end goal is to increase income, it was difficult for them to articulate or take photos that represented how such a goal might be reached. One must take into account the decision-making skills of the villagers as producers and entrepreneurs under decades of a controlled economy under the Communist Government. It has not in recent history been the role of the villagers to determine how to increase income. It has only been their job to receive inputs and orders from the government leaders. Three of the four photographs that the researchers felt clearly fit into the “planning/diversification” category were presented by one villager—a man who oversees the village government. Perhaps once that category was offered to the other villagers, it may have seemed like the most logical step (and therefore the first priority) to increase income for the village. Or perhaps the influence of one individual, a village government official, outweighed the wishes of the rest of the villagers in terms of prioritizing categories that represent the “care about”s of the villagers. Another possibility is that the villagers looked to the village government official for leadership in determining how to prioritize the categories, much as they have done in their day-to-day operations for decades under a command economy.

ZU responses compared to Villagers’ responses

While most of the villagers’ photographs indicated that “income” was the most important “care about” for the future of the village, Zhejiang University participants assumed that markets, government policies, and education would be the biggest concerns of the villagers. The category of income (which villagers provided the most photographs to represent) received 18 of 136 responses from the ZU participants.
ZU participants and villagers were most closely aligned in categories of future of children and the environment. A significant number of responses from ZU participants were not even indicated as a “care about” by the villagers. For example, ZU participants listed 16 responses for government policies, 11 for production costs, 11 for technology, and 14 for education.

Consideration must be given to the prioritization of the categories by the villagers (disregarding the number of photographs submitted to the researcher) in comparison to the 136 responses provided by the ZU faculty/graduate students. The following graph lists the villagers concerns in priority order and compares villager and ZU responses (percentage of total photographs taken by villagers and ZU participants).

**Percentage Comparison of Villager and ZU Responses**

- Villagers 7.4% 5.6% 7.4% 42.6% 7.4% 9.3% 9.3% 7.4% 42.6% 7.4% 9.3% 9.3% 7.4% 9.3%
- ZU 3.7% 2.2% 13.2% 8.8% 3.7% 4.4% 8.1% 5.9% 3.7% 0.0% 11.8% 8.1% 8.1% 10.3% 4.4%

*Two ZU categories not included in this graph include farmer organizations at 1.5% and other concerns at 2.2%.

**Implications/Recommendations**

The use of photo elicitation as a research tool for this study proved effective. The cameras were unifying tools among the researchers, government leaders, and villagers. The use of photographs in an integrated way assisted the researchers to obtain information and encouraged dialogue that probably would not have been possible through conversations focused on written or verbal interviews. The researchers probably would not have gained access to the villagers without the cameras. The use of photo elicitation as a research method peaked the curiosity of the county and village leaders and seemed to open the doors for the researchers to conduct their study.

At face value, the responses summarized in the previous section indicate a lack of congruency between villagers and ZU graduate students/professors. There is some indication, however, that the villagers and ZU respondents are not necessarily that far apart in their thinking regarding the future of Snake Village. While ZU respondents listed categories that were not given by the villagers (i.e., government policy, production costs, technology, education, outside investments), these categories are important for strong and continued economic growth. In fact the
categories of village diversification, market development, and increased income that the villagers listed as top priorities for the future of Snake Village will likely be realized by understanding and applying the categories listed by ZU, i.e., government policy, production costs, technology, education, and outside investment. Additional research is called for to clarify villager and ZU responses, but it is possible that responses varied in part due to the level of academic background and critical thinking skills of each group. ZU respondents could more easily articulate in detail the necessary components for a village to become and remain economically viable.

Zhejiang University is perfectly suited to assist Snake Village and other Chinese rural villages in developing and implementing strategies for moving into the free-market economic system being promoted and encouraged by the Chinese government. To do so, ZU must first determine what its philosophy and mission will be. Given the bureaucratic structure of extension in China, it is unlikely that the existing structure of the Department of Agriculture overseeing extension will be challenged in the near future. Therefore, ZU may need to focus its efforts on working with and through the Department to provide services to rural villages.

Zhejiang University must also consider how its academic and research programs are preparing future leaders to meet the demands of a changing economic system. A critical review ZU curriculum as it relates to rural development issues, including issues related to free market economics, strategic planning, decision making, critical thinking, etc., is called for. This review must not be limited to the actual courses offered to undergraduate and graduate students. It must also include a review of the knowledge and experience base of the very professors who teach and train China’s future leaders. Zhejiang University must provide opportunities for its professors for faculty improvement leaves or continuing education in free market system countries. Opportunities must be made available for ZU administrators, professors, and graduate students to explore and study curriculum at established universities in democratic countries to better understand the importance of acquiring both technological and sociological skills.

Zhejiang University is currently developing a new academic major focusing on rural development which, if structured with the country’s economic transformation in mind, has the potential to train thousands of undergraduate students in the so-called “soft” skills related to leadership, decision making, strategic planning, and critical thinking. In preparation for offering this new major, ZU should consider a needs clarification process training program (as developed by Jones) for its professors. The ZU professors would be required to practice the process as well as teach it as part of the graduate curriculum.

ZU might consider developing a series of continuing education programs for villagers that relate to government policies, production costs, technology costs/benefits, environmental issues, investments, credit, farmer organizations, and other factors that influence community development. Again, these programs can be managed through the Bureau if not provided directly to the villages. In any case, Zhejiang University should consider leading efforts to provide such information to China’s rural population.

It is likely that ZU will not have a great deal of human or financial resources for experimental programs. It will be important that they pay very careful attention to program planning and delivery based on the true “care abouts” of the rural villages. As China prospers and encourages entrepreneurial activities, someone will recognize the need to provide continuing education and
training programs to the rural sector. Zhejiang University is well position to be a leader in this area if it chooses to do so.

Conclusion

In order to develop a curriculum for its students and professional development for its extension agents, Zhejiang University (ZU) must come face-to-face with practical problems encountered by ordinary farmers. These experiences will facilitate a reorientation from government commanded extension services to consumer demanded extension services. It is hoped that through this transition, and as a result of the collaboration between ZU and ISU, ZU professors and extension specialists will become advocates of the rural population, so that peasant problems and concerns may reach the proper authorities positioned to respond to these needs. In a system such as China’s where extension has meant top-down government mandates to be imposed on the peasants by extension agents, the idea of interpersonal communication among extension agents and villagers is almost revolutionary.

References


