

ARTICLE

## The status of action research in the People's Republic of China

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### ABSTRACT

Participative action research can appear both strange and familiar in the People's Republic of China. China has a distinctive intellectual history, a specifically Chinese approach to citizen participation, and a growing interest in international forms of action research. For more than 30 years, participative approaches have been used in rural and community health in China, although these activities usually lack explicit reflective learning. Much of Chinese education follows authoritarian Confucian traditions. Transformation of Chinese education through action research is recently receiving official recognition as it is expected to develop creativity based on reflective thinking. There is also evidence that action research is bringing organizational and professional development to Chinese public administration, and enhancing rural health. While China has established a few centres of action research education cooperation from the West, it is inevitable that Chinese forms of action research will develop. The challenge for the international community of action researchers is to build open communication with Chinese action researchers to help the development of a Chinese way of conducting action research.

### KEY WORDS

- action research
- Chinese characteristics
- participation
- People's Republic of China

## Introduction

As the People's Republic of China becomes increasingly open to cultural cooperation, trade and intellectual exchange, opportunities are opening for international collaboration in action research. However, few action researchers in the West know about action research related traditions and innovations in China. Participative and action research activities in the People's Republic of China are under reported in both Chinese and English language journals. China has a distinctive intellectual history, a specifically Chinese approach to citizen participation, and there is growing interest in forms of action research with Chinese characteristics.

Academic dialogue about action research in China is beset with contradictions. Following the opening up of academic dialogue over the past three decades several observers inside and outside China comment that Chinese researchers need to learn new strategies from their more highly developed counterparts in western universities. This is apparent, for example, in critique of Chinese educational traditions (Boisot, 1987). On the other hand, China has a strong record of participative practice in rural health services. Since the 1970s, Barefoot Doctors and rural clinics have reported remarkable success in rural and community health, compared to other countries with similar per capita incomes, with practices for treating and preventing common diseases and health problems grounded in a participative world view and using locally available remedies (De Geyndt, Zhao, & Liu, 1992; New & New, 1975; V. L. Wang, 1975). A few recent accounts of action research in rural and community health have been reported (see Chien, Chan, & Morrissey, 2002; C. C. Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998; Yuan, 2001, 2002), but prior to the last decade participative action was viewed as distinct from research.

The situation is complicated by linguistic usage. In most English language journals, research is presented in a propositional style, whereas Chinese writing carries a 'kind of performative instruction . . . In Chinese, the pragmatic function overrides the semantic, such that expressions are prescriptive rather than descriptive' (Park, 2001, p. 85). Chinese academics and administrators have over a half-century of experience in developing forms of science to serve the masses. In pursuing our 'immodest aim' to 'transform the very idea of social science' (Sage Publications, 2003), action researchers may have much to learn from dialogue with Chinese participative and action researchers. While we do not suggest that China is or has been free of elites, there has been a continuing discourse about learning from the masses. Although this has often been wrongly seen as an administrative problem that could be solved through coercion or violence, the idea of learning from the masses seems deeply entrenched in Chinese culture and intellectual life.

Action research started with Kurt Lewin's application of scientific method

to the work of social reform during the 1940s (Lewin, 1946; Masters, 2000). Participative action research emerged in the 1970s with the work of Orlando Fals Borda and others, as a challenge to 'normal' science and the 'collapse of positive values and attitudes towards humankind and nature' (Fals-Borda, 2001, p. 27). Action research has been associated with systems thinking since the 1960s (Checkland, 1991; Churchman, 1968, 1971; Flood, 1999, 2001). Recently, complexity theorists are beginning to use action research as a robust way of inquiring into complex adaptive systems (Snowden, 2002; Van Wyk, 2003) During the last 30 years the action research movement has grown and diversified through international exchanges, and the opening up of communication through the Internet.

Although China is the most populous country in the world, with more than 5000 years of civilization and cultural diversity, a library search in English and Chinese languages revealed few reports of action research in China. We located more than 100 articles in Chinese, but they have not been reviewed, mainly because we did not have sufficient time or resources for translation.

### **Why should we do action research now?**

China has embarked on a huge programme of economic and social change. This includes a shift from planned economy towards a socialist market economy; the decentralization of public and economic administration; opening China to the rest of the world; and transition from communal to family farming (Fewsmith, 2000). These changes bring greater well-being and freedom for many, as well as increasing inequalities and new forms of disadvantage. In the midst of complex changes, Chinese people, organizations and institutions are looking for ways of working that are humane, effective and sustainable. Facing new challenges, they look for new approaches to guide them through complexity, and for practices that enable success (Laidlaw, 2004).

### **Citizen participation in China**

For many centuries, Confucian principles have dominated Chinese governance and education, while Taoist and Buddhist traditions nurtured alternative perspectives. The Tao symbol (Figure 1) is an ancient expression of a participative paradigm. The circular form represents a cycle of change that was described in



Figure 1 Tao

**Table 1** Buddhist thought and action research

<i>Noble truths</i>	<i>Practice</i>	<i>Action research</i>
The truth of suffering	Recognize a problem	Observe
The truth of the origin of suffering	Understand the causes of the problem	Reflect
The truth of cessation	See that the problem can be resolved	Plan
The truth of the path	Take action to end the problem	Act

writing about the Fifth Century BC in the *I Ching* (1951). The dark yin and light yang represent the mutual interdependence of dynamic action and receptive reflection. This symbol, which has been of central importance in the history of Chinese thought, can be taken to illustrate the dialectic between action and reflection that some (e.g. Dick, 2001) see as the heart of action research. This model of mutual interdependence contrasts with the mind-body split, which has characterized western thought since the 17th Century philosopher René Descartes (Descartes, 1966). Roughly a millennium after Confucius, Buddhist thinking arrived in China. The ‘four noble truths’ of Buddhism can be translated into a four-stage model for practice, which roughly corresponds to one model for action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

It may be worth noting in passing, that both the action research cycle and the four noble truths are a sequence for practice, not a description of reality. In reality, the sequence is more likely to be:

- 1 The causes of the problem;
- 2 The problem and its effects;
- 3 Action for improvement (practice);
- 4 Cessation or end of the problem.

In our present contingent reality, however, problems never completely end. In the cycle of life, every solution is followed by new problems.

In 1949 the newly established People’s Republic of China inherited a feudal administration that suffered widespread disruption during decades of civil war and invasion. Socialist strategies, such as voluntary agricultural collectivization, were guided by Chairman Mao Zedong’s thought ‘from the masses to the masses’ and built on traditional mutual aid among peasants (Li, 1997).

Participative principles, such as the ‘two participations’ that encouraged workers to participate in management and managers to join in physical work (Lippit, 2000) continued throughout the Maoist era. In his essay ‘On Practice’ Chairman Mao expressed an axiom of action research: that ‘practice alone is the criterion of the truth’ (see Figure 2), or in other words, that theory comes from

practice (Mao, 1937). The household responsibility system, which started in one small village, was imitated, then described, studied and tested by researchers and policy makers. Finally, during the 1970s, it was disseminated throughout China, making a significant contribution to rural reform. This has been described as action research with Chinese characteristics (Li, 1997). However, when voluntary participation strategies did not produce large-scale change quickly enough to meet pressing needs, the historical precedent of top-down administration provided a model for enforced central planning and political control. Mao established participative principles in Chinese political ideology, but in practice, participation led to some results not acceptable to the government, which then resorted to repressive and violent control. This was an outcome of treating the economy as an administrative problem, and undervaluing incentives, initiative and innovation (Lippit, 2000).

实践是检验真理的唯一标准。

**Figure 2** Practice alone is the criterion of the truth

President Deng Xiao Ping ushered in a period of reforms in 1979, which continues to the present day. The loosening of central control and opening of China to international trade generated opportunities for initiative and innovation, which in turn opened possibilities for local participation.

Neighbourhood Committees are the lowest level of administration, typically responsible for between 1500 and 2000 households. Since the 1980s, urban neighbourhood committees have been taking on new roles in community service, local culture, public security, health care and other aspects of local community life (China.org.cn, 2002). Community development and local autonomy are replacing old top-down models of central planning and administration. In community health, for example, staff of neighbourhood committees in Shanghai knocked on the door of every household in the community, providing leaflets, masks, disinfectant and advice, and monitoring quarantine procedures. This avoided a major outbreak of SARS with no deaths when other mainland Chinese cities suffered hundreds of thousands of deaths in 2002 (*China Daily*, 2004). Professor Liu, of the Research Committee on Chinese Cities Development, commented that: 'Long-term success will largely depend on the full and active participation of citizens in their communities' (China.org.cn, 2002).

三个代表

**Figure 3** Three represents

Recent years have seen action researchers coming from other countries to work on Chinese projects, as well as an increase in what may be called 'action

research with Chinese characteristics'. Citizen participation was re-emphasized in 2000, when President Jiang Zemin had the 'Three Represents' (see Figure 3) written into national law. This pithy phrase in Chinese is difficult to translate, but these three principles guide the Government and the Party in the New Millennium, to represent the development of China's productive forces, the advancement of Chinese culture and the fundamental interests of the masses of Chinese people. The nature of the three represents is to lead the Chinese Communist Party to represent the public, make policies for the people and implement them. In practice it enables official agencies to benefit the people, and develop productive forces and culture to meet the material and spiritual needs of the people.

Senior political leaders continue to emphasize participation in policy making. President Jintao Hu visited an agricultural village to interview farmers about ways that agricultural policy could stimulate production of rice and other crops (Liu, 2004). Communist Party leaders recognize that citizen participation benefits the nation as a whole. The large and complex Chinese administration has had long-standing problems preventing abuses of power and monitoring how central policies are administered and implemented by local officials. Participative strategies may enable the public to monitor and evaluate implementation of government policies at the local level, and this can assist feedback between micro- and macro-levels of administration. Action research and systems thinking approaches are relevant to this effort.

### **Some examples of citizen participation**

'Democracy dialogue' was introduced to Wen Ling city in 1999. Public meetings with up to 600 participants are held four times per year, and are broadcast in local streets and villages. One local leader introduced an issue for discussion in this way: 'We want to get your opinions, to provide us with good ideas on how to scientifically plan and act' (Jin & Zhang, 2003). This consultation generates ideas for improved policy and administration, produces problem-solving suggestions, and is a forum for local accountability. Citizens ask questions, about 85 per cent of which are answered immediately. Others are discussed in the meeting, or referred for later consideration.

Similar citizen participation activities are appearing in many Chinese cities, including on-line dialogue between city presidents and local people, local government telephone hotlines, public forums, speech competitions, oral defence competitions, evaluation meetings, and other strategies for local people to criticize the work of leaders and offer suggestions on city administration (*People's Daily*, 2003). This level of citizen participation in social affairs is new in Chinese politics.

Chinese industry has found ways to bypass administrative measures in-

tended to protect the environment. In response to this the Chinese department of environment protection is now stimulating public discussion and ethical debate, and opening up access to information. Learning from the success of popular environment protection movements in other countries, China sees citizen participation as a key element in environmental protection. This represents a shift from passive to active environmental protection (Bai, 2003). The aim is to assist industry to control pollution and to enable community monitoring of the environment.

In 2002 a national ministry of construction delivering water, natural gas, heat, roads, traffic, safety and management services, opened the first '12319 Hotline' in Shen Yang Province. A year later this telephone service operated in 10 cities, answering questions, receiving suggestions, arranging repairs, discussing ways to make services suit needs. Through 12319 Hotlines the construction ministry monitors performance and collects statistics, looks for lessons learned and provides a scientific base for policy development (Liu, 2004). Although this level of citizen participation may not seem remarkable in some western countries, it is new in China, and the system of feedback and lessons learned shows some characteristics of action research.

Despite these and other examples, the practice of citizen participation lags behind the official ideology, and research is needed to develop, document and disseminate appropriate processes and practices for citizen participation in China. Action research is a good way to evaluate and develop strengths and methods for citizen participation at local and regional levels.

## **International action research in China**

Although there is no generally agreed translation of the term 'action research' into Mandarin, several Chinese organizations have reported on action research projects in English language journals over the last two decades. Internationally accepted approaches to action learning and action research have been introduced since the late 1980s, with the assistance of donor agencies such as Ford Foundation, UNDP, GTZ (Li, 1997), HelpAge International and others. The traditions and institutionalized practices of Chinese administration limited the implementation of participative practices, even when espousing a participative ideology. The introduction of international development agencies espousing participative principles may contribute towards resolving this tension in Chinese administrative traditions.

## Educational action research

China has a long history of educational theory, stemming from Confucius, who stressed that the student should follow the expert master-educator, through imitation, emulation, learning by rote and practice. Conformity and an outward show of form were more important than inner consolidation of insights and their practical applicability. When Confucius was asked ‘Have you not been taught anything out of the ordinary?’ the sage replied ‘No, I have not . . . I studied the odes . . . I studied the rites. I have been taught these two things’ (Confucius, 1979, p. 141). Theory precedes practice in this traditional teacher-centred learning, in contrast to Mao’s assertion that theory comes from practice.

In 2004, a language teacher wrote that in her four years as a student of education in a Chinese University she was asked to:

- Lead my students through the text of grammatical sentences step by step;
  - Provide some background information concerning certain texts;
  - Paraphrase some difficult words or grammatical points, or translate them.
- (Tao, 2004 [website])

The limitations of this teacher-centred education tradition, which does not recognize that students create their own knowledge, are increasingly felt as China moves towards a more open society and economy (Liu, 2004).

Educational action research was introduced to China from other countries in the early 1990s, focussing on curriculum renewal and teacher development (X. Wu, 1996, 1998; Z. J. Wu, 1995) mainly through practitioner research by teachers. Educational action research is attempting to transform Chinese education, developing creativity based on reflective thinking in teachers and students. Introducing an action inquiry approach is more of a conceptual problem than a technical one, as this way of thinking is unusual in Chinese contexts (Ge, 2001). Action research has been used to inquire into school curriculum areas including language (Ge, 2001; Tao, 2004; X. Wu, 1996, 1998; Z. J. Wu, 1995), (Guo, Chiang, & Chang, 1997) and chemistry (Yang & Tuan, 2001).

China’s Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching was established at Guyuan Teachers College, Ningxia Province in 2003. The Centre aims to become a focal point for excellence in educational development in foreign language teaching and for other progressive educators in China and elsewhere. Moira Laidlaw (Laidlaw, 2004) facilitates the adoption of the Living Theory approach to Action Research (Whitehead, n.d.). Teachers’ reports of their action research are published in English on the ActionResearch.net website (at <http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/moira.shtml>) and in a forthcoming book (Tian & Laidlaw, forthcoming), so we are able to understand some of the work of this centre in rich detail. Concentrating on three main areas: classroom management, lesson-planning and evaluating pupil-learning,

action research students focus on why they do what they do and how they can harness energy to facilitate effective inquiry and learning in their pupils. The action research approach at Guyuan is innovative and creative, generating new forms of reflective inquiry for teachers to improve the quality of students' learning in China during a period of rapid change (Laidlaw, 2002).

As an example, one student (a teacher of English) inquired how he could improve his 'paraphrasing' to help his students improve their learning of English. In the early stage he started at the surface, framing the problem as paraphrasing words. After several weeks experimenting and communicating, he understood the issue more deeply; that paraphrasing can be carried out at any level from small pieces of words to whole sentences, even whole paragraphs (Yong, 2004). Action research is not a quick fix to solve immediate problems, but a long-term cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting to engage with the human dimensions of the issues under investigation (*People's Daily*, 2003).

Educational action research is receiving official recognition in China. Han Weiping, Dean of Shanxi Changzhi No. 12 Middle School, is reported as saying that educational reform involves teachers changing their role from concern with correct teaching style to being researchers of their own scholarship (*People's Daily*, 2003). Because of its potential to bring practice into line with espoused ideology, it may be that the contribution action research can make to education may be its greatest potential contribution to the long-term well-being of the Chinese people.

In higher education, developmental action inquiry was chosen as the change strategy for introducing problem-based learning in a pre-registration nursing programme in Hong Kong. The central task was to transform tutor and student participants into collaborators in curriculum reconstruction. Evaluation findings showed a paradigm shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, from individual self-learning to co-operative group-learning, and from theory-based to practice-based learning (Pang, 2002).

Teaching staff at Hong Kong Polytechnic University undertook an action research study into the development of nurses as reflective practitioners. Methods of data collection included observation, interviews, students' written material, and teacher reflection. The study suggested that teachers and students should be partners in reflective learning. Students gradually reconceptualized nursing practice, challenging their taken-for-granted views (Wong et al., 1997).

An action learning approach was used in implementing learning contracts for mental health clinical placements for undergraduate nursing students in Hong Kong. The researchers participated in developing course content, teaching strategies, and a system of contract learning for clinical placement, and then evaluated its implementation. Data collection methods included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Results showed that learning contracts increased students' autonomy and motivation; there was more sharing between students and teachers;

and the quality of teaching and learning was improved (Chien, Chan & Morrissey, 2002).

Technical action research was used in a quasi-experimental test of criteria-referenced marking of student essays in Hong Kong, demonstrating a statistically significant difference between two sets of marks. When a criteria-referenced assessment form was used there was a wider range of marks and their distribution was closer to the normal distribution (Kuisma, 1999).

Group support systems (GSS) are networked, computer-based systems that facilitate discussion in groups of people who may be communicating face-to-face or remotely. Action research was used to evaluate their introduction into a Hong Kong Police force management skills training programme, and to evaluate the usefulness of police practice theories developed by officers using GSS (Davison, 2001).

Participatory Rapid Appraisal (Chambers, 1994a, 1994b) was used by the Centre for Integrated Agricultural Development in Beijing Agricultural University, with German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) to develop a set of participative rapid appraisal tools and techniques for surveys of very poor rural communities, to identify problems, needs and development opportunities. On implementing participative rapid appraisal in several pilot villages, the researchers found that the political and legal circumstances in rural China can adapt to 'bottom-up' institutional development, that the majority of farmers are disadvantaged and support participative development, and that project staff or other 'outsiders' can facilitate local farmers to make institutional, political and social changes, but 'outsiders' should not make implementation decisions (Li, 1997).

Hong Jiang Yuan's work out of Sichuan University (Yuan, 2001, 2002) is another example of a university serving its community through participative rural appraisal conducted in the service of disadvantaged peoples in communities. In 2001, the Health Promotion and Training Centre on Aging of Sichuan University and HelpAge International conducted a participative rapid appraisal survey of poor older people in three minority communities. Similar surveys were undertaken in Xian, Shanxi Province and Changsa, Hunan Province. Insisting on participative principles, these projects enabled disadvantaged elderly people to articulate their needs, and propose strategies to reduce poverty and improve their quality of life (Yuan, 2001). The main difficulties faced by these participants and researchers related to developing longer term strategies to build on the findings of participative rapid appraisal and the Centre is looking for ways to move into implementation through developmental action research (Yuan, personal communication, 15 July 2003).

In Chengdu Province, Participative Rural Appraisal (PRA) was used to assess the health needs of older members in disadvantaged Miao, Yi and Tibetan rural villages. While all elders were able to meet basic needs for food, clothing and shelter, few had any disposable cash income. Old people work hard in agri-

culture or other rural production, without opportunities to increase production above poverty levels. Local community hospitals are badly equipped and supplied, with infrequent visits by qualified doctors or nurses. More than half the older people surveyed had an identified disease, disability or handicap. Water supply is poor, with many households spending about one-third of their working time carrying water (Yuan, 2001). The PRA team identified potential solutions in local participative community programmes for micro-credit, community health and other measures, and researchers involved in this programme called for the development of more extensive action research programmes in a local university to support community health development (Yuan, 2003).

Participative action research and technical action research (see Masters, 2000) strategies are increasingly valued by health professionals. Photovoice, a participative research method (C. C. Wang & Burris, 1997), was used in Yunnan as a strategy to enable women to articulate their health needs. This project aimed to empower rural women, transforming their self-image from objects of policy to actors in the policy arena. The stories that women told about photographs they had taken illustrative of their lived experience, influenced policy decisions to provide day care and training for midwives. Through participation, stakeholders, including community members, policy-makers and academics, were united in their commitment to improving the quality of life (C. C. Wang, Burris, & Ping, 1996; C. C. Wang et al., 1998).

### **Action research in public administration**

Case studies illustrate that action learning and action research are used successfully for organizational, managerial, professional and personal development in China. From 1994 to 1996 action learning and action research have been used to assist the People's Republic of China in modernizing its central administration with the purpose of building institutional capacity in support of the Chinese Government policy to modernize public administration and strengthen its management of public enterprises. This institutional development used a long-term action learning process to 'train the trainers' at national, provincial and enterprise-based training institutions. This programme focused on organizational consulting and human resource management, and initiated certification of ISO training standards in China for management development specialists (Centre for Socio-Economic Development, 1994). This approach produced effective learning among Chinese trainers and managers who participated in the project, as well as between Chinese and international (Swiss) partner institutions (Yiu, 1998). Participants learned that development strategies must be adapted to context if international transfer of knowledge and skill is to be effective.

A special action learning programme was introduced in 1999 to help the

less-developed western provinces to improve their management capacity, as an extension of the original Sino-Swiss Programme. The programme is also based on action learning and learning by doing. It runs three years for each participating province, starting with Gansu Province in 1999, with Qinghai Province joining in 2001 (Sino-Swiss Management Training Programme, 1999).

### **Action research with Chinese characteristics**

Action research has many histories, varied definitions and a range of purposes and methods (see Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Tripp, 2003). Action research approaches appear both strange and familiar to Chinese people. The phrase 'action research with Chinese characteristics' can refer to projects devised in China, by Chinese people, to solve Chinese problems. This definition includes a variety of action research types, settings and disciplines, and does not exclude international influences.

Some action research lacks authentic participation in decision making by those who may be affected by the outcomes. Top-down approaches, which could be called manipulative action research, have a long history in the Chinese institutional framework in China. Participative action research combining participation, scientific research and action for improvement is a new concept in China that offers many potential benefits.

Li (1997) reviews five reports of experimental rural development, covering more than 30 individual projects in the decade after 1987. These projects included studies of innovative practices in land tenure, rural taxation reform, communal property, farmers' cooperatives, farmers' associations, rural town planning and restoration of state owned enterprises to farmers' cooperatives. These projects were initiated by administrators or policy researchers, and though they typically involved extensive consultation with stakeholders, were not grass-roots initiatives 'from the masses to the masses'. Government support gave access to financial resources, more rapid dissemination than farmers' initiatives, and publication of results to inform other infrastructure development. However, as Li notes, without active participation of the rural population, local knowledge and indigenous institutional arrangements were not drawn on, and cultural and social differences were often ignored. Many local populations were passive recipients and implementers, rather than major actors (Li, 1997). These projects will not achieve the potential for participative democracy that action research can offer, and changes may not be sustainable.

The Wuli, Shili, Renli (WSR) systems approach was developed from systems methodologies, eastern philosophies, and participants' reflections on varied projects. The meanings of Wuli, Shili and Renli are drawn from the tradition of Confucianism. 'Wuli' means investigation of the facts of a situation, sometimes

with modelling of future scenarios; 'Shili' implies enough knowledge of different theories and methods to allow informed choices about which methods to choose, and which paths of action to follow. 'Renli' means ability to deal with human relations. There are four key papers written about the WSR approach. The first offers a general introduction to its philosophy, methodology and main concerns, one of which is how human relations are to be negotiated as an integral part of systems practice (Gu & Zhu, 2000). The second paper explores the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism that informs WSR, and explains WSR as a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, though it shares common concerns with some western systems perspectives (Zhu, 2000a). The third paper details an application of WSR methodology in the management of water resources in China (Gu & Tang, 2000). The final paper in the series focuses on different meanings or interpretations of Renli (dealing with human relations). Here, the authors emphasize the importance of facilitation skills and critical reflection, as well as the use of formal methods for organizing debate (Brugha, 2001). In the end, Chinese people will decide which forms of action research with Chinese characteristics they will use in specific projects.

### **How can action research help Chinese people?**

Participative action research is directed towards the search for practical solutions to pressing human problems. It is grounded in a participative world view, and an ethical commitment to humane values. Action researchers can facilitate people, including illiterate or poorly educated and disadvantaged people, to speak out about their difficulties, needs and problems, to find the reasons for their own disadvantage and offer methods to solve problems with available resources. Local people and officials can participate in cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection. Action research can help people to improve their quality of life, help officials make policies catered to people's needs and help people solve their urgent problems. Participative action research is meaningful to Chinese development.

Chinese officials are increasingly looking to the voice of the masses, expressed through local committees and organizations, to understand their difficulties and plan to meet their needs. Local people actively participate in local administration, community development, educational reform and political life. The Chinese government makes a distinction between citizen participation and western-style representative democracy. We suggest that action research can improve the quality of Chinese citizen participation activities. Many Chinese citizen participation activities could be described as incomplete action research cycles. Citizen participation involves participation, planning and action. It is increasingly recognized that evaluation practices have often been inadequate in the past. What is often missing is critical reflection on the lived experience of

those affected by planning and implementation, leading to explicit learning, capturing the lessons learned and publishing them.

When Chinese citizens and officials identify and define problems they often do not know how the problems came about. A strong tradition of critical analysis of the causes of social problems does not exist. It is difficult to establish the causal chains, and difficult to track (or anticipate) the consequences or outcomes of past (or current) actions. Chinese public administration has emphasized goals and results, but has neglected process and critical analysis. Action research is one way to address the lack of research into complex processes of administration in the largest and most diverse political unity in the world.

## Conclusion

We believe that action research has important contributions to make to Chinese education, rural development, community health and administration in government and industry. With the transformation from a planned to a socialist market economy, the People's Republic of China has experienced three decades of rapid and deep economic and social change, while maintaining political stability (Cosbey, 2001; Hudson, 2000). As they continue to move away from a centrally planned economy, Chinese administrators inherit a capability for detailed planning that has achieved both remarkable successes and disastrous failures in implementation. In this article we have given an overview of citizen participation and other aspects of Chinese political, social and cultural systems that have prepared fruitful ground for the seeds of participatory action research. We have briefly referred to a range of projects in which international experts introduced action research approaches and frameworks to rural development, education, community health and public administration. Sustainability has been noted as a key problem. In some projects participation was limited by the institutionalized practices and traditions of Chinese administration (Li, 1997); some projects did not continue past the end of international development funding (C. C. Wang et al., 1996); and others were successful in identifying needs, but not in implementing programmes to meet those needs (C. C. Wang & Burris, 1997; Yuan, 2001, 2002). The Chinese traditions of citizen participation can be strengthened and enriched with action research to enhance democratic values and the quality of life (Gergen, 2003; Laidlaw, 1994; Xia, 2004).

Two action research programmes stand out in their potential for longer term sustainability. The Wuli, Shili, Renli approach was developed out of a number of systemic action research projects, has been taken up in Cambodia (Cox, Shams, Jahn, Ericksen & Hicks, 2002), Japan (Gu, Nakamori & Zhu, 2001), and other countries, has been applied in several contexts (Gu & Zhu, 2000; Zhu, 2000b) and continues to be developed (Brugha, 2001; Zhu, 2002,

2004). While this approach to action research shares some universal concerns, it is a Chinese phenomenon, with deep connections with Chinese epistemology and culture. This may be a useful model for westerners interested in Chinese action research to study.

China's Experimental Centre for Educational Action Research in Foreign Languages Teaching at Guyuan Teachers College is an outstanding example of skilful cooperation by western experts, applying action research principles to their own work of facilitating educational action research in China. Encouraging students (who are themselves teachers) to solve their own problems using an action research approach, Moira Laidlaw (Laidlaw, n.d.) and her colleagues work systematically to entrench action research in the teacher education institution, and in the schools served by the teachers. This programme has been sustained for some years, and has strong institutional support, with a Dean who leads by example, using action research in his own working life (see Fengjun Tian's case study in Tian & Laidlaw, forthcoming). This achievement has taken sustained effort over several years. Academics and consultants in the West who wish to engage with Chinese institutions to encourage action research should plan for a long-term commitment. Most importantly, we should use an action research approach in work to develop action research. Experience at Guyuan Teachers College shows the value of demonstrating learning through action and inquiry, rather than leading or directing (Laidlaw, n.d.). Doing action research with people develops sustainability more effectively than telling them how to do it.

Dialogue between western and eastern ways of knowing and doing can be valuable for learning on both sides. In parts of the world where it is well established, action research is varied and complex. Despite growing overlaps and interconnections among action research approaches (Dick, 2004) heterogeneity among action research styles is likely to continue due to differences in histories, cultures and institutional forces. We cannot assume that there is some universally applicable model of action research. Interaction among action researchers from differing backgrounds, professions and approaches will facilitate sharing and construction of models appropriate in different contexts and settings. We should not think that the task of western academics is to teach Chinese people to do action research. Instead, the task of experienced action researchers is to enable and facilitate people to develop their own models to bring 'together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 1).

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