

ASSA Project Report

Of the project entitled "Media and Community Building: A comparison research of Australia and China"

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The project is concerned with community building in the context of the global network society. One of the key debates about governance in the contemporary society is the role of the state in the globalising world. Some researchers argued that the welfare state had entered a period of crisis (Tesoriero, 2010) while others contended that power was diffusing away from all state to non-state actors (Nye, 2011). Community empowerment and participation, among others, are suggested as alternatives to cope with the crisis of the welfare state. This project explores perceptions of community in the network society and the role of new information technology in community development via a comparison research of Australia and China.

1. Research activities

The project commenced in June soon after the funding was available. Field observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews in Australia and China were carried out to accomplish the aim of the project. The core research activities included fieldwork in Australia and China.

1) Fieldwork in Australia

The Australian team members visited 10 communities in Melbourne and Sydney, interviewed 13 individuals and conducted 5 focus-groups (40 people participated in the focus-groups). Communities visited in Australia included Chinese new migrants group in Melbourne, Melbourne Confucius College, Sydney City Council (Living in Harmony Festival 2013), Hurstville Senior Citizen Centre, Rainbow Culture Group, Sydney city Fusion Taichi Class, Ultimo Community Centre (Chinese Migrant English Class, Indonesian Welfare Association, Yiu Mihg Hung Fook Tong Society, and Turrumurra Healthy Lifestyle Group.

2) Fieldwork in China

Dr Qin Guo and the Chinese team members visited 10 communities in China (Beijing, Shantou and Shaoguan), interviewed 9 individuals and conducted 4 focus-groups with 20 participants. Communities visited in China included Maizidian Community Centre, Wangjing Community Centre, Taiyang Gong Community Centre and 798 Cultural Park in Beijing, Senior Citizen Centre in Shantou, and Yunmen, Baizhu, Tuanjie, Dongfen and Pingxi villages in Shaoguan.

2. Research outcomes and findings to date

The research investigated definitions of the term "community", perceptions of the importance of community, expectations of community, difficulties encountered in building and sustaining a community, and media used for community communication in Australia and China.

The research findings include the following:

- 1) Obvious differences were found between the definitions of the term community given by Australian participants and Chinese participants. Most Australian participants associated community with personal interest while their Chinese counterparts associated it more with geographic factors (residential area).
- 2) While the importance of community was commonly recognised, it appeared that one's perception of the importance of community was closely related with personal perception of the meaning of community. There was no significant difference found between Australian and Chinese participants in this regard.
- 3) It appeared that the Australian participants and Chinese participants shared similar expectations of community. The top ranked criteria of a "good community" were the alignment with community members' needs and being interesting.
- 4) Most of the participant communities, except two, used telephone/mobile phone, flyer, and face-to-face as communication channels among community members. The two exceptions were an online research community and a Chinese new migrant group. Both of the community involved transnational communication and thus online communication technology was more convenient and economical to use.

One research paper entitled "The Power of the Grassroots", based on the findings of this project, has been submitted to the Journal of Cross-cultural Communication.

3. Potential for future research

Apart from the above stated findings, the project brought forward the question about the value of community work and its measurement. Governments invest a lot in community work. Do they assess the return of the investment and how? This question was asked by many of the participating community workers during the interviews. This question is not only about the economics of community work. More importantly, it is about the guiding principle of community work and the direction of community development. It is worthwhile to engage people of broader sectors, including community workers and members, government representatives, and academics, in further exploration of this question.

References

- NYE, J. S. 2011. *The Future of Power*, New York, PublicAffairs.
- TESORIERO, F. 2010. *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation*, Sydney, Pearson Australia.