

## Revisiting a Dramatic Triangle – State, Villagers, and Social Activists in Chinese Rural Reconstruction Projects

By Professor Stig Thøgersen

*Friday, 23 October 2009* Based on first-hand experience and studies of social and economic relations in China's rural villages, Prof Thøgersen touched on changes in organisational structures, particularly with regard to current rural reconstruction projects in the Hubei Province. He posited – using the idea of individualisation from German sociologist Ulrich Beck – that the rise of individual autonomy in modern China has resulted in a process of dis-embedding/re-embedding of social discourse within the tripartite relationship among the state, villagers, and social activists and urban intellectuals. As the state has historically reacted with force and violence when met with resistance in carrying out social projects, the villagers recognise the need for rural reconstruction efforts to be initiated and directed at their level.

For the purpose of “constructing a new socialist countryside,” the Chinese government organises work teams and provides funding. However, these work teams are directed to areas where the village heads have applied for the “special status” in order for their villages to be considered for the project. In this way, rural reconstruction is initiated and directed at the micro-level rather than the state level. The initiatives and funding could also come from social activists, village elites or entrepreneurs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academics, who work closely both with the villages and the state on community projects.

While the state is still the dominant actor in these endeavours, the participatory approach is gaining ground in China. Two lines of discourse – the masses and the social activists/NGOs/intellectuals – are currently being re-embedded into the organisational structure, similar to the Rural Reconstruction Movement of the 1920s and 1930s when urban intellectuals worked to improve the life of the peasants and modernise the countryside. This phenomenon has led some state actors to look for allies among village elites and social activists. Conversely, as the state is still the main source of material and human resources and funding, this approach ties the village elites closer to the state.