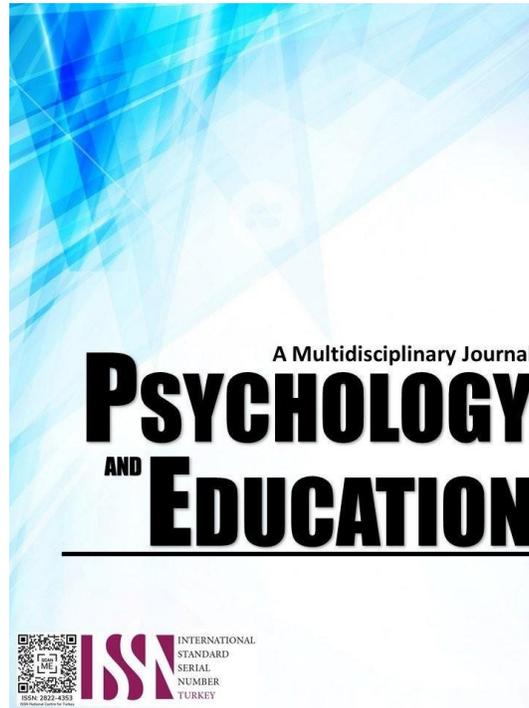


**PROGRAM-RELATED FACTORS INFLUENCING THE VILLAGERS'
ENGAGEMENT AND SENSE OF BELONGINGNESS IN THE
“BEAUTIFUL COURTYARD” PROGRAM: INPUTS
TO POLICY ENHANCEMENT**



PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Volume: 41

Issue 8

Pages: 930-935

Document ID: 2025PEMJ4012

DOI: 10.70838/pemj.410806

Manuscript Accepted: 06-12-2025

Program-Related Factors Influencing the Villagers' Engagement and Sense of Belongingness in the “Beautiful Courtyard” Program: Inputs to Policy Enhancement

Huajun Huang ,* Gynny G. Gumban

For affiliations and correspondence, see the last page.

Abstract

This study explores the program-related factors that shape villagers' engagement and sense of belongingness in the “Beautiful Courtyard” program a flagship initiative under China's rural revitalization agenda. Conducted in Jiangmen City from August 2024 to January 2025, the research employed a descriptive-correlational design involving 382 randomly selected household respondents. Drawing from citizen engagement theory, pluralistic co-governance, public governance, and social identity theory, the study assessed perceptions of policy implementation, resource allocation, program management, incentives, and social acceptability. Statistical analyses using SPSS v26, including Pearson's correlation and ANOVA, revealed that resource allocation, program management, and social acceptability significantly influenced both engagement and belongingness. Conversely, policy implementation demonstrated no statistically significant impact. Engagement was highest among younger and more educated villagers, particularly in terms of attitude and willingness. A robust sense of belongingness was associated with strong emotional connections, member consciousness, and project impact. These findings underscore the need for participatory strategies, equitable resource distribution, and enhanced program communication to improve the sustainability and effectiveness of rural revitalization efforts. The study offers critical insights for policymakers, local governments, and development practitioners in designing inclusive and community-centered rural programs.

Keywords: *rural revitalization, community engagement, sense of belongingness, Beautiful Courtyard program, public governance, China, participatory development*

Introduction

Rural revitalization has become a cornerstone of China's national development agenda, aiming to bridge the longstanding urban–rural divide and foster equitable growth through environmental, socio-cultural, and economic reforms. Within this context, the “Beautiful Courtyard” program represents a key intervention designed to enhance the livability of rural communities by encouraging the aesthetic and functional improvement of residential spaces. More than a beautification campaign, the initiative seeks to strengthen ecological awareness, instill civic pride, and reinforce villagers' social identity and community engagement (Chen & Su, 2023; Li, Gao, & Lu, 2023). Despite considerable investment and government recognition, uneven levels of villager participation and weak sense of belonging remain persistent challenges, especially in non-model villages (Kaifeng Reform and Political Research, 2022).

Existing literature underscores that the success of community-based development programs hinges not only on top-down policy directives but also on grassroots engagement and perceived ownership by local stakeholders (Cornwall & Jewkes, 2020; Pretty & Ward, 2020). Studies on rural governance in China point to the limitations of technocratic implementation models, which often marginalize the voice of villagers, reduce agency, and impair program sustainability (Chen & Wang, 2022). While incentives and social mobilization have shown promise in enhancing public participation, their effectiveness is often moderated by local contexts, program management styles, and available resources (Guo, Liu, & Sun, 2023). Yet, there remains a lack of empirical clarity on how these program-related factors systematically influence villagers' engagement behaviors and their deeper emotional connection to the community.

This study responds to that gap by investigating the relationship between villagers' perceptions of five key program dimensions policy implementation, resource allocation, program management, incentives, and social acceptability and their levels of engagement and sense of belongingness in Jiangmen City, a pilot site of the “Beautiful Courtyard” initiative. The study builds on the theoretical foundations of citizen engagement, pluralistic co-governance, public governance, and social identity theory to contextualize villagers' behaviors and attachments within a broader governance framework (Sun, 2020; Chaskin et al., 2021).

In identifying which program-related factors most strongly predict engagement and belongingness, this research aims to inform more inclusive and responsive policy design. Specifically, it addresses the following objectives: (1) to evaluate villagers' perceptions of program-related elements; (2) to assess their engagement and sense of belonging; and (3) to determine the significant correlations between program-related factors and these two dependent variables. The study tests the hypothesis that perceptions of program-related variables are not significantly associated with levels of engagement and belongingness, aiming to validate or challenge this assumption through empirical data.

Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the evolving discourse on participatory governance in rural China, offering actionable insights for policymakers, rural planners, and development practitioners seeking to optimize the impact of community-based revitalization programs.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design, which is scientifically appropriate for investigating the relationships between villagers' perceptions of program-related factors and their corresponding levels of engagement and sense of belongingness. The descriptive aspect facilitated a systematic evaluation of villagers' attitudes, experiences, and perceptions, while the correlational approach allowed for statistical testing of hypothesized associations among key variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This non-experimental design is particularly suitable when manipulating variables is neither practical nor ethical in community-based interventions.

Respondents

The study was conducted in Jiangmen City, Guangdong Province, China, from August 2024 to January 2025. Jiangmen was purposively selected as it has been recognized as a pilot site for the "Beautiful Courtyard" program, representing both model and non-model village contexts. Using a probability sampling technique, 382 household heads were randomly selected from a population of 15,222 households across eight demonstration and twenty-two non-demonstration villages. Inclusion criteria required respondents to be aged between 18 and 70 years, current residents of the village, and willing to participate in the survey.

Instrument

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used to capture perceptions of five key program-related variables: policy implementation, resource allocation, program management, incentives, and social acceptability. The instrument also measured dimensions of engagement (program cognition, attitude, willingness, and behavior) and sense of belongingness (integration, member consciousness, project impact, emotional connection).

To ensure content validity, the instrument underwent expert review by five scholars three based in the Philippines and two in China specializing in rural development and governance. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha, with values for all constructs exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012), indicating internal consistency and scale reliability.

Procedure

Data were collected using the "Questionnaire Star" online platform to ensure accessibility and minimize interviewer bias. Survey links were distributed via email and local communication channels, and participants were given two days to complete the instrument at their convenience. This approach supported efficient data acquisition while respecting participants' time and privacy.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the central tendencies and variability of responses across key variables. Inferential statistical techniques were employed to examine relationships and group differences. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the strength and direction of associations between program-related factors and the dependent variables of engagement and sense of belongingness. To determine significant differences across demographic classifications, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was applied. Moreover, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were conducted to evaluate sampling adequacy and the appropriateness of the data for multivariate procedures. All statistical tests were interpreted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$, consistent with standard thresholds in social science research.

Ethical Consideration

The study followed ethical research practices as approved by the Central Philippine University Research Ethics Review Board. Informed consent was obtained digitally, with participants advised of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All responses were anonymized, and data were securely stored and destroyed post-analysis in compliance with data protection protocols.

Results and Discussion

Table 1. Villagers' Perception Rating of "Beautiful Courtyard" Program-Related Factors

Variables	SD	Mean ^a	Description
Policy Implementations	0.768	3.79	Good
Resource Allocation	1.115	3.78	Good
Program Management	0.505	4.32	Very Good
Incentives for Program Management	0.958	3.30	Average
Program Social Acceptability	0.489	4.38	Very Good

^aMean score: 1.0-1.80 Poor; 1.81-2.60, Fair; 2.61-3.40 Average; 3.41-4.20 Good; 4.21-5.0 Very Good

Table 1 presents the villagers' perception ratings of program-related factors in the "Beautiful Courtyard" initiative. The findings indicate that Program Social Acceptability ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.489$) and Program Management ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.505$) received the highest mean scores, both falling within the "Very Good" category. This suggests a high level of community approval and satisfaction

with these dimensions of the program.

Policy Implementation ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.768$) and Resource Allocation ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.115$) were rated as "Good," indicating generally positive perceptions but with slightly greater variability in responses, particularly in the area of resource distribution. Incentives for Program Management received the lowest mean score ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.958$), categorized as "Average," highlighting a relative area of concern that may require policy attention and enhancement.

Table 2. *Villagers' Extent of Engagement in Terms of Program Cognition, Engagement Attitude, Engagement Willingness, and Engagement Behavior Towards the "Beautiful Courtyard" Program*

Variables	SD	Mean ^a	Description
Program Cognition	0.890	4.089	Good
Engagement Attitude	0.965	4.449	Very Good
Engagement Willingness	0.979	4.406	Very Good
Engagement Behavior	1.025	4.111	Good

^aMean score: 1.0-1.80 Poor; 1.81-2.60, Fair; 2.61-3.40 Average; 3.41-4.20 Good; 4.21-5.0 Very Good

Table 2 summarizes the extent of villagers' engagement with the "Beautiful Courtyard" program, as measured across four dimensions: program cognition, engagement attitude, engagement willingness, and engagement behavior. Results indicate that Engagement Attitude ($M = 4.449$, $SD = 0.965$) and Engagement Willingness ($M = 4.406$, $SD = 0.979$) received the highest mean scores, both falling under the "Very Good" category. These findings suggest a strong internalized support and readiness among villagers to participate in program-related activities.

Engagement Behavior ($M = 4.111$, $SD = 1.025$) and Program Cognition ($M = 4.089$, $SD = 0.890$) were rated as "Good," reflecting a moderately high level of actual involvement and awareness. However, the relatively higher standard deviation for Engagement Behavior implies greater variability in the degree of villagers' actual participation compared to their expressed attitudes and willingness.

Table 3. *Villagers' Level of Sense of Belongingness in Term of Requirements Integration and Implementation, Member Consciousness, Impact Between Villagers and Projects, Common Emotional Connection on the "Beautiful Courtyard" Program*

Variables	SD	Mean ^a	Description
Requirements Integration and Implementation	0.955	4.197	Good
Member Consciousness	0.451	4.408	Very good
Impact Between Villagers and Projects	0.452	4.375	Very good
Common Emotional Connection	0.458	4.263	Very good

^aMean score: 1.0-1.80 Poor; 1.81-2.60, Fair; 2.61-3.40 Average; 3.41-4.20 Good; 4.21-5.0 Very Good

Table 3 presents the villagers' level of sense of belongingness to the "Beautiful Courtyard" program across four dimensions: requirements integration and implementation, member consciousness, impact between villagers and projects, and common emotional connection.

The highest-rated dimension was Member Consciousness ($M = 4.408$, $SD = 0.451$), followed closely by Impact Between Villagers and Projects ($M = 4.375$, $SD = 0.452$) and Common Emotional Connection ($M = 4.263$, $SD = 0.458$), all of which fall within the "Very Good" category. These results reflect a strong identification with the program, collective awareness, and emotional resonance among participants.

In contrast, Requirements Integration and Implementation ($M = 4.197$, $SD = 0.955$) was rated "Good," indicating a generally favorable perception, albeit with slightly more variability in responses. This variation suggests that while procedural integration is positively viewed, there may be inconsistencies in how program requirements are communicated or executed across communities.

Table 4 illustrates the relationships between villagers' perceptions of program-related factors and their level of engagement in the "Beautiful Courtyard" program. Overall, a strong positive correlation was observed between Overall Program-Related Factors and the Overall Level of Engagement ($r = 0.875$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher perceived quality in program implementation is significantly associated with increased engagement.

Among the specific program variables, Program Social Acceptability ($r = 0.896$, $p < 0.001$) and Program Management ($r = 0.879$, $p < 0.001$) showed the strongest associations with engagement. Resource Allocation ($r = 0.755$, $p < 0.001$) and Incentives for Program Management ($r = 0.550$, $p < 0.001$) also displayed significant positive correlations. Conversely, Policy Implementation showed no statistically significant relationship with any of the engagement components (e.g., $r = -0.003$, $p = 0.951$ for overall engagement), suggesting that procedural awareness alone may not influence participatory behavior.

When disaggregated by engagement dimensions, Program Cognition, Engagement Attitude, and Engagement Willingness consistently showed strong positive correlations with the four key program variables social acceptability, management, incentives, and resource allocation with coefficients ranging from $r = 0.713$ to $r = 0.891$, all at $p < 0.001$. Engagement Behavior, while still significantly correlated, yielded relatively lower coefficients (e.g., $r = 0.665$ to $r = 0.763$), possibly reflecting the complexity of translating intention into consistent action.

Table 4. Relationships Between the Villagers' Perception of Program-Related Factors of "Beautiful Courtyard" Culture and Level of Engagement

Variables	Overall Program Related Factors		Policy Implementation		Resource Allocation		Program Management		Incentives for Program Management		Program Social Acceptability	
	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig
	Overall Level of Engagement	0.875	0.000*	-0.003	0.951	0.755	0.000*	0.879	0.000*	0.550	0.000*	0.896
Program Cognition	0.844	0.000*	0.007	0.888	0.736	0.000*	0.824	0.000*	0.824	0.000*	0.882	0.000*
Engagement Attitude	0.847	0.000*	-0.020	0.693	0.717	0.000*	0.845	0.000*	0.845	0.000*	0.891	0.000*
Engagement Willingness	0.824	0.000*	-0.033	0.516	0.713	0.000*	0.829	0.000*	0.829	0.000*	0.843	0.000*
Engagement Behavior	0.766	0.000*	0.056	0.276	0.665	0.000*	0.763	0.000*	0.763	0.000*	0.748	0.000*

*Statistically significant at 5% level

Table 5 presents the correlation analysis between villagers' perceptions of program-related factors and their overall sense of belongingness to the "Beautiful Courtyard" program. A strong and statistically significant correlation was found between Overall Program-Related Factors and Overall Sense of Belongingness ($r = 0.839$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that more favorable perceptions of the program are closely associated with a deeper emotional and social connection to the initiative.

Among the individual program components, Program Social Acceptability ($r = 0.858$, $p < 0.001$) and Program Management ($r = 0.847$, $p < 0.001$) demonstrated the highest correlations with sense of belongingness, followed by Resource Allocation ($r = 0.718$, $p < 0.001$) and Incentives for Program Management ($r = 0.598$, $p < 0.001$). Policy Implementation, however, did not show a significant relationship with any aspect of belongingness (e.g., $r = -0.053$, $p = 0.305$), reinforcing previous findings that procedural awareness alone does not foster emotional investment.

When disaggregated by sub-dimensions, Common Emotional Connection exhibited the strongest relationship with Program Social Acceptability ($r = 0.896$, $p < 0.001$) and Program Management ($r = 0.870$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that visible program success and social approval are central to cultivating collective emotional attachment. Similarly, Requirements Integration and Implementation ($r = 0.846$, $p < 0.001$) and Member Consciousness ($r = 0.805$, $p < 0.001$) were positively influenced by all core program dimensions except policy implementation.

Table 5. Relationships Between the Villagers' Perception of Program-Related Factors of "Beautiful Courtyard" Culture and Level of Sense of Belongingness (N382)

Variables	Overall Program Related Factors		Policy Implementation		Resource Allocation		Program Management		Incentives for Program Management		Program Social Acceptability	
	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig	r.	Sig
	Overall Sense of Belongingness	0.839	0.000*	-0.053	0.305	0.718	0.000*	0.847	0.000*	0.598	0.000*	0.858
Requirements Integration and Implementation	0.846	0.000*	0.020	0.699	0.746	0.000*	0.834	0.000*	0.514	0.000*	0.851	0.000*
Member Consciousness	0.805	0.000*	-0.058	0.260	0.674	0.000*	0.818	0.000*	0.555	0.000*	0.826	0.000*
Impact between villagers and projects	0.785	0.000*	-0.087	0.090	0.666	0.000*	0.803	0.000*	0.545	0.000*	0.803	0.000*
Common emotional connection	0.875	0.000*	0.003	0.951	0.755	0.000*	0.870	0.000*	0.550	0.000*	0.896	0.000*

*Statistically significant at 5% level

The findings of this study provide empirical insights into the program-related determinants that shape villagers' engagement and sense of belongingness within the "Beautiful Courtyard" initiative, a cornerstone of China's rural revitalization strategy. By statistically validating the relationships between perceptions of program elements and two key outcome variables engagement and belongingness this research advances understanding of what sustains or hinders grassroots participation in rural development.

First, the data support the hypothesis that engagement levels are significantly influenced by villagers' perceptions of program management, resource allocation, incentives, and social acceptability, but not by policy implementation. These results echo the findings of Zhang and Li (2021), who reported that community acceptance and transparent governance mechanisms were critical for fostering voluntary participation in rural programs. In contrast, the lack of a significant relationship with policy implementation mirrored by near-zero correlation values (e.g., $r = -0.003$, $p = 0.951$) underscores a persistent disconnect between top-down directives and community-level realities. This confirms the critique offered by Chen and Wang (2022), who noted that centralized planning, if poorly contextualized, often fails to generate sustained behavioral engagement at the grassroots.

Moreover, the strong positive associations between engagement attitude, willingness, and behavior and program management ($r > 0.82$, $p < 0.001$) reinforce the role of participatory leadership in community governance. These findings substantiate the theoretical framing of pluralistic co-governance and citizen engagement theory, both of which emphasize that when local actors feel empowered and

valued, engagement shifts from passive compliance to active ownership (Sun, 2020; Chaskin et al., 2021). Importantly, the results indicate that attitudinal and cognitive dimensions of engagement are more positively skewed than behavioral outcomes an observation consistent with Sun and Zhao's (2022) claim that positive perceptions do not always translate into participatory actions due to institutional, cultural, or informational barriers.

In terms of sense of belongingness, the study found that emotional connection, member consciousness, and perceived program impact were rated "Very Good" by participants and were significantly correlated with program management ($r = 0.847$), social acceptability ($r = 0.858$), and resource allocation ($r = 0.718$). These results align with social identity theory, which posits that collective attachment arises from shared recognition, identity, and the visibility of communal outcomes (Pretty & Ward, 2020). The high correlation between common emotional connection and social acceptability ($r = 0.896$, $p < 0.001$) affirms that when villagers see their values reflected and respected by the program, emotional and psychological investments increase.

Interestingly, despite government emphasis on the policy backbone of the initiative (General Office of the State Council, 2024), policy implementation was not significantly associated with either engagement or belongingness. This discrepancy highlights a key limitation in the program's current structure: while technical guidance and national standards (China Standardization Administration, 2024) offer necessary frameworks, they fall short if not coupled with participatory mechanisms and localized adaptations. This finding is in direct conversation with Guo et al. (2023), who advocated for the integration of incentive mechanisms and culturally embedded leadership structures to enhance program uptake and ownership.

The present study also contributes novel empirical evidence by quantifying the predictive strength of individual program components. For instance, program social acceptability consistently yielded the strongest correlations across all variables of interest, suggesting it is the most potent predictor of both engagement and belongingness. This is a crucial insight for program managers and policymakers, as it shifts the emphasis from administrative delivery to community perception management.

One limitation of the study is its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inferences. Longitudinal research could further clarify the evolution of engagement and belongingness over time, particularly as the program matures. In addition, while the study focused on Jiangmen City, future comparative studies across different provinces could reveal how cultural and socio-economic contexts mediate program effectiveness.

Finally, future work may explore qualitative narratives to deepen the understanding of emotional and identity-based components that statistical models may underrepresent. Mixed-methods approaches could illuminate not only what variables matter, but how and why villagers perceive them as such.

Conclusions

This study provides substantive evidence that villagers' engagement and sense of belongingness in China's "Beautiful Courtyard" program are significantly influenced by program-related factors such as social acceptability, management effectiveness, resource allocation, and incentive structures. These findings advance the current understanding of rural revitalization efforts by shifting the focus from policy formulation alone to the quality of program delivery and the perceptions it engenders within communities.

Notably, the lack of significant association between policy implementation and the dependent variables highlights a critical implementation gap demonstrating that technocratic solutions, when detached from community contexts, are insufficient to mobilize sustained grassroots participation. This underscores the need for more participatory governance mechanisms that center on transparency, local agency, and emotional investment.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable insights for policymakers and development practitioners aiming to enhance the impact of rural programs. Interventions should prioritize increasing program visibility, community-based leadership, and responsive management systems that build trust and emotional connection among villagers. Furthermore, the robust correlations found in this study validate the theoretical application of pluralistic co-governance and social identity frameworks in the context of rural environmental and cultural transformation.

References

- Chaskin, R.J., Brown, P., Venkatesh, S., & Vidal, A. (2021). *Building community capacity*. Routledge.
- Chen, H., & Su, Q. (2023). Influencing factors and mechanism of villagers' participation in rural human settlement environment governance. *Journal of Hunan Agricultural University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 24(05), 74-82.
- Chen, L., & Wang, Y. (2022). Policy implementation and rural development in China: A contextual analysis. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 90, 210-225.
- China Standardization Administration. (2024). Guide for the construction of beautiful courtyards in rural areas. Retrieved from https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26133530
- Cornwall, A., & Jewkes, R. (2020). What is participatory research?. *Social science & medicine*, 51(11), 1667-1676.

General Office of the State Council of China. (2024, May). *Guiding opinions of the General Office of the State Council on improving the living environment in rural areas*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2014/content_2697075.htm

Guo, M., Liu, R., & Sun, J. (2023). Incentive mechanisms and rural governance in China: Enhancing program performance. *Public Administration and Development*, 43(1), 78-93.

Kaifeng reform and political research. (2022). *Research report on the beautiful courtyard building in Lankao County*. Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ywAfBhuTUa8OV_m1XdW6rw

Li, Q., & Wang, X. (2021). Information dissemination and rural development participation in China: Challenges and strategies. *Journal of Rural Sociology*, 86(3), 421-436.

Li, X., Gao, Y., & Lu, H. (2023). The impact of migrant workers' experience on returning migrant workers' participation in rural public affairs governance. *China Rural Observation, 2023*(04), 70-88.

Pretty, J., & Ward, H. (2020). Social capital and the environment. *World development*, 29(2), 209-227.

Sun, X. (2020). *Study on stability maintenance model of District X in F City from the perspective of public governance theory* (Doctoral dissertation). Liaoning Shihua University.

Sun, Y., & Zhao, L. (2022). Rural participation in development programs: The gap between attitude and behavior. *Community Development Journal*, 57(2), 289-304.

Zhang, J., Chen, H., & Liu, K. (2023). Practical activities and behavioral engagement in rural development initiatives: Evidence from China. *Development in Practice*, 33(1), 112-127.

Zhang, Q., & Li, H. (2021). Community participation and social acceptance in rural development programs: Evidence from China. *Community Development Journal*, 56(4), 723-738.

Affiliations and Corresponding Information

Huajun Huang

Central Philippine University – Philippines

Gynnyn G. Gumban

Central Philippine University – Philippines