



A village in the Province of Guizhou, China

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## Connecting the countryside

**The gap between the services available to people living in urban and rural areas could soon be narrowed thanks to a new project which will use smart devices and big data technology to improve life for country dwellers.**

Led by Northumbria University in the UK and the Chinese Academy of Sciences in China, the project will explore new ways of providing vital services such as healthcare and transport to people living in remote villages, especially vulnerable residents such as the elderly or very young.

The project has been shortlisted for the prestigious [Newton Prize](#) and, if successful, could win a share of the £1 million fund, set up to tackle some of the world's most pressing health and development issues.

The prize celebrates outstanding international research partnerships which are helping to achieve global development goals and improve the quality of life for people in developing countries and in the UK.

Shengfeng Qin, Professor of Design at Northumbria University's School of Design, believes the project is essential to ensure people living in the countryside are connected with vital services and are given the same opportunities for development as their urban counterparts.

He said: "Like many countries, China has seen rapid urbanisation in recent years which has resulted in many young adults moving to the cities, meaning the populations of more rural areas are increasingly made up of either the elderly or children.

"These more vulnerable groups require access to services such as healthcare, education, transport and energy, but up until now these have not been as readily available in the countryside as in cities.

"Our project will combine smart technologies such as artificial intelligence with big-data analysis to find out what services are currently available and which areas are lacking. We will then take a design-led approach to propose new ways of providing essential services such as health and social care."

The project, entitled *Transforming Service Design and Big data Technologies into Sustainable Urbanisation*, will be delivered in partnership with the British Council and National Natural Science Foundation of China. It will see academics from the UK and China working to find new solutions to the challenge of urbanisation.

Together they will explore three themes – health care and mobility for the elderly, remote healthcare systems, and alternative ways of generating power.

In addition, Professor Qin will lead on the creation of an online platform through which people can contribute to the design of new services. The site

will engage with service users, businesses, policy makers and other stakeholders in the UK and China, with the big data collected then used to shape future innovations in areas such as healthcare.

The project is one of 20 shortlisted for the 2019 Newton Prize – an annual prize awarded for the best research or innovation promoting the economic development and social welfare of Newton Fund partner countries. Eligible prize countries for the Newton Prize 2019 are China, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Three prizes of up to £200,000 each will be awarded to a project with each prize country, with an additional prize (the Chair's Award) of up to £500,000 awarded for a project that also demonstrates the best knowledge exchange and partnership development.

During November the shortlisted projects will be celebrated at award events taking place in each country, during which the winning project for that country will be announced.

These events will be followed by a UK reception on the 9 December in London hosted by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

The shortlisted projects have been peer reviewed and will be judged by the Newton Prize Committee, chaired by Professor Alice Gast, President of Imperial College. She said: "I am very impressed by the pioneering ideas, collaborative research and potential impact of the shortlisted applications for the Newton Prize 2019. I look forward to working with my fellow committee members to select the overall winners, it will not be an easy decision."

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## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences

[rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk)

07923 382339



### **Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences

[andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk)

07708 509436



### **Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact

PR and Media Manager

[rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk)

07377422415



### **James Fox**

Press Contact

Student Communications Manager

[james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk)



### **Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk)



### **Gemma Brown**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)