



# Crossing Borders in Rural China

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[Shorter version published in China Campus Magazine, Nov 2005]

***The Rural China Education Foundation (RCEF) was founded by a group of young Chinese aiming to improve education in rural China. Sharing a common dream, they initiated an annual short-term volunteer teaching program. It strives to break down barriers between urban and rural China, between overseas and mainland Chinese, and between education and life. This article is a summary of RCEF's first program and an overview of its philosophy. A detailed report and a photo gallery can be found on [www.ruralchina.org](http://www.ruralchina.org). RCEF can be contacted at [info@ruralchina.org](mailto:info@ruralchina.org).***

From July 15 to August 4, 2005 an international group of sixteen young overseas Chinese participated in a program to teach children in rural areas of mainland China. The program was organized by the Rural China Education Foundation (中国乡村教育基金会, RCEF), an international non-profit organization formed to improve the quality of education in rural China. While many organizations sponsor rural students' tuition fees or give material donations to improve the physical hardware of rural schools, RCEF focuses on the "software" – improving the contents and methods of rural education. We want to support students in becoming more than "study machines" and to help them appreciate and enjoy learning.

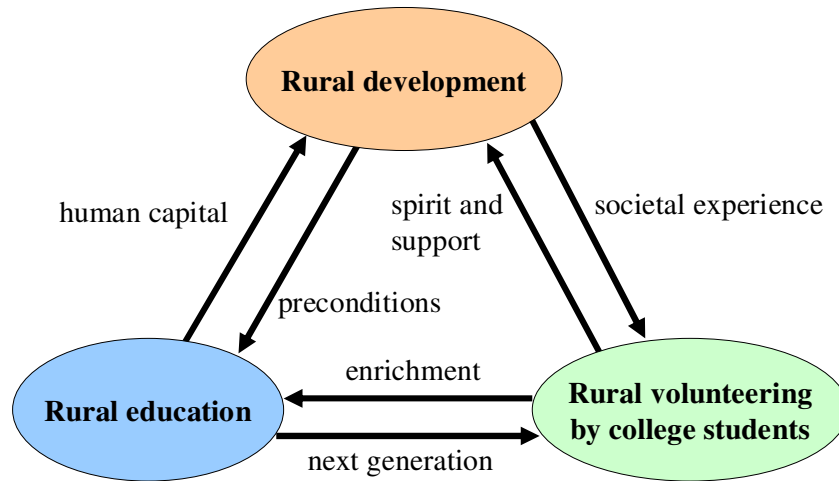
Moreover, RCEF pays great attention to the context of rural education, which is linked to the so-called "three-dimensional rural problem" (三农问题), concerning the countryside, agriculture, and villagers. Education and community are deeply interconnected: the rural community is the context for education, and in turn, education is the engine of development. This is a reason for collaborating with a group of Chinese student volunteers, *Student Volunteers for Rural Support and Surveying Project* (大学生支农调研项目; SVRS). They possess a wealth of local knowledge and experience in community development. The volunteer program is an opportunity for young overseas Chinese to support their fellow volunteers from mainland China, to teach in rural schools, to participate in community-building, and to learn first-hand about the realities of rural China today.



This year's volunteers came from Singapore, Hong Kong, the United States and Canada, and were selected from over 100 applicants. During the selection process, interviewers focused on the candidates' motivation, Mandarin fluency, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability, knowledge and experience of rural China, and teaching ideas. Of the 16 volunteers in the program, 5 were mainland students who are now studying abroad, 5 were Chinese who grew up in other countries, and 6 were from Hong Kong. 7 were undergraduate students, 6 were graduate students, 2 were independent researchers, and 1 was a postdoctoral scholar.

Before the start of the Program, we spent two months preparing the curriculum and materials. On July 15, we gathered in Beijing. From July 16 to July 22, we joined the training of SVRS in Miyun County. More than seventy leaders of university student rural volunteering societies from all over China had gathered there. During this week, renowned agricultural economist Wen Tiejun and other rural development experts delivered lectures about current rural issues and a rural development approach called rural reconstruction (新农村建设). Rural reconstruction, started in the early twentieth century by James Yen and others, is based on the idea that improving the economic and social circumstances of a village requires unity among villagers, cooperation among them, and hope for the future. In its revived form today, activists promote grassroots mutual aid associations like village art troupes, women's societies, elderly people's associations, and farmers' cooperatives to foster a spirit of self-reliance. One of the volunteers' slogans is "to alleviate poverty, first help the will" (扶贫先扶志).

During the training week, we participated in discussion meetings in which each team prepared their plans and goals for the village trips in detail. We international volunteers also prepared the classes we would teach in detail and practiced the lessons in front of each other, to refine our content and methods. After the training, we split up into four teams and spent ten days teaching in village schools. The teams went to Miyun County (Beijing), Yi County (Hebei), Yutai County (Shandong) and Guoyang County (Anhui). Each team consisted of 4 international volunteers and 4 to 8 mainland volunteers; SVRS also had many of their own teams composed entirely of mainland students. All sites were in the Northeast of China. The Anhui team had to travel the farthest, spending more than 17 hours on trains and buses. The sites we visited were economically in reasonable condition, but in most of them, the villagers' spirits were quite low, meaning they lacked community life and self-confidence.



### Basic philosophy

The diagram summarizes the basic philosophy of the Rural China Education Foundation. Rural development, rural education, and rural volunteering by college students and other socially committed citizens are closely related. Good rural development is a precondition for good rural education. In turn, good rural education accelerates rural development, because it has the potential to cultivate capable human resources in the village. Rural education also produces some college students, many of whom will continue to care about rural areas and get involved in projects that help to improve rural areas. College student volunteers can help improve rural education by promoting education for overall development (素质教育) in the villages. Moreover, they can contribute to rural development by implementing the ideas of the rural reconstruction movement. This development work also benefits the student volunteers themselves, as they learn, through practice, valuable lessons about the realities and functioning of society, which they rarely get in the formal Chinese higher education system.

Many organizations – Chinese and foreign – operate in rural China, but often do not consider all three components. Some organizations restrict themselves to donating money and materials to advance rural development or rural education, thereby ignoring the indispensability of skilled human resources for strengthening rural people's spirits and improving the quality of education. Other organizations send volunteers to help with rural education but neglect the fact that education should not occur in isolation from the community. Finally, for organizations like SVRS it is important to realize that education is essential to sustainable rural development. Education targeted at broad personal development and rooted in the community can cultivate the next generation of people who care about and have the ability to help rural China.

### In the village



A central goal of our program in rural China was to learn from the villagers. We wanted to experience rural life and gain an understanding of the struggles of rural people, as well as their own strategies and approaches for coping with them. Without such understanding, our attempts to help would likely end up meaningless and futile. Talking with and listening to villagers was especially important because many of us (the international volunteers) did not grow up in rural China ourselves and had only a shallow knowledge of life there. On the trips, we stayed at the homes of villagers and participated in their daily lives. We assisted the SVRS volunteers, who conducted systematic investigations by interviewing villagers. In turn, SVRS volunteers assisted us in our teaching.

As RCEF volunteers, we were interested in the state of rural education at a micro-level. What were the lives of rural students like? What did rural teachers think about the way they taught? What dreams did students and teachers have? To learn more about such issues, we tried to connect to local teachers and to build strong personal connections with our students. We often asked students for their own opinions and experiences. We, in turn, explained to them our ideas about education and the reasons for our visit.

The majority of rural students will not be able to enjoy high-school or college education. We believe that the education they do receive should equip them with the skills and the mindset they will need to develop their opportunities for a better life and to contribute to their communities. What we could accomplish ourselves in ten days of summer vacation classes was limited. We could not alleviate the pressure which the students have to deal with in school, and if we would only help them with their normal class work, our visit would not make much of a difference. However, by stimulating their thinking in novel ways, we hoped to be “the spark that lights a prairie fire” (星星之火,可以燎原). We shared our thoughts and experiences to give students new perspectives, we tried to spark students’ interest in and appreciation for their own community and their own lives, and we encouraged them to pursue their passions and interests.

Our choice of classes was based on the philosophy of exposing the students to a broad spectrum of knowledge, making them use the full potential of their minds, and relating to the local community.

- **Speaking skills:** Speaking skills are important for rural children, because being able to narrate clearly and express themselves fully will enhance their future opportunities in education, work, and life. We gave students opportunities to express themselves in a safe environment through talking about their lives, retelling stories, evaluating our teaching and reporting their learning to each other.
- **Community research:** We taught students basic research skills and then they went out to do investigations on topics relevant to the village, such as agriculture, education, and environment. They were encouraged to ask questions and interview other villagers such as their parents and relatives. See Box 1.



- **Theater games:** In various theater games, students could develop self-confidence, practice expressing themselves in dialogue and acting, as well as put their creativity and imagination to use.
- **Arts and handcrafts:** This included paper-folding, paper-cutting, drawing, making collages, making paper pagodas, etc.
- **Quiz:** This was a competition in which the class was split up in teams. Questions were about nature, the world, logic, culture, sports, and historical events. See Box 1.
- **Visual illusions:** These are very special and intriguing pictures, which can be interpreted in two different ways or which are not what they seem to be. See Box 1.
- **Math:** We gave them challenging and unusual problems, many related to concrete, real-life situations.
- **Science lab:** We did not teach from text books, but instead demonstrated interesting experiments and let them conduct experiments themselves.
- **Spoken English:** Since English accounts for one third of exam material, there was a great demand for this. We tried to use a lot of daily-life expressions to show students that English is a tool for communication. We also taught English through participatory activities, games and songs.

We used teaching methods designed to motivate and to help in effective learning:

1. We encouraged students to ask questions and to give their own opinions.
2. We related the topics of our classes to real-life examples.
3. We emphasized understanding instead of memorization.
4. We tried to foster students' creativity.
5. We tried to motivate students by making their learning experiences enjoyable and memorable.
6. When possible, we let students work in groups rather than just by themselves.

### Our experiences

Students ranged in age from 7 to 17 years old, so we split up into primary and secondary school classes. Every site was different, but in general the children were very interested in our classes. They enjoyed the active and lively way of teaching. We, in turn, found the students hard-working, intelligent, and motivated. Although their living conditions and future prospects were difficult compared to the city, most of them still found joy and hope in their lives. Box 2 displays some comments by a teacher, several students, and an RCEF volunteer.

In implementing the curriculum, some of our ideals inevitably clashed with reality. In some villages, we did not have sufficient communication with the local people and teachers beforehand. We had limited information about how many students would come to our classes, and what ages they would be. Although we thought that it was very important to connect with local teachers and discuss teaching approaches, it was difficult to achieve this at some sites. Sometimes, parents had misconceptions about our work, expecting us to be English tutors. It was difficult to explain to them why we were teaching subjects which seemed irrelevant to school examinations. At times,



class discipline was a problem, and students were not always comfortable with actively participating. Others had trouble working well in groups. Much of this improved with time and we often saw great improvement in students' participation and cooperation over several days. However, our struggles reinforced how important it is for rural education reformers to gain practical experience in the rural classroom, trying out different techniques, and learning from the problems that arise. We learned a lot from these situations that will help us to make changes for next year.

We as international volunteers have also gained much appreciation for our mainland-Chinese counterparts. As college students, many from rural areas themselves, they have little money to spare and are under a lot of pressure. Yet, they have the strong will to support the countryside, and they sacrifice their time and money for it. We found them dedicated, knowledgeable, hard-working, and idealistic. We hope that their spirit of rural volunteering will spread among university students in China.

Box 3 contains a commentary from an SVRS volunteer on our teaching.

### **What next?**

Though we are limited by time in this short-term teaching program, we consider it a “vitamin pill” to supplement the regular school diet by exposing children to a way of learning and ideas that they usually do not receive. The successes and failures of our teaching experience will help us to revise our modules and add to the growing research on how to realize quality education in rural China in practical, direct ways. By living and talking directly with rural students and parents, we understand more about how they view school and their educational needs. The mainland-Chinese student volunteers gave valuable feedback on teaching content and approaches. Many of them expressed great interest in continuing the discussion on how to help rural education, and are eager to incorporate ideas from our modules into their future teaching trips. They plan to keep in contact with and regularly return to most of the villages we visited this summer.

We understand that to extend our philosophy to regular education is difficult. We cannot expect traditional rural teachers to increase their workloads as they are already overburdened and under extreme pressure to prepare students for examinations. Thus, we will seek out and empower researchers and practitioners who are pioneering quality educational initiatives in villages, in the hopes that these micro-level projects will provide valuable, concrete examples of quality rural education that can transform rural life. This is obviously a long-term goal with no miracle formula or clear-cut results; most of the change will go on inside people's minds and in individual behaviors before tangible, societal reforms can be seen. Nevertheless, we are committed to supporting this transformation from its first steps, financially, intellectually, and personally, by participating each summer through our volunteer program. We are confident that quality education is the key to bringing about lasting change for the people of rural China.



Our current projects include:

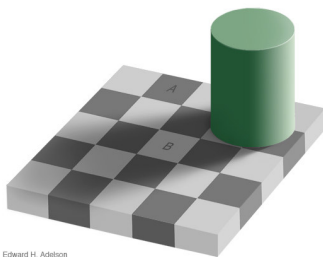
1. **2006 RCEF SHORT-TERM VOLUNTEER TEACHING PROGRAM:** We will be recruiting volunteers from the US, Singapore, Canada, and Hong Kong for the 2006 summer volunteer teaching trip.
2. **SHORT-TERM TEACHING BOOK:** We are writing a handbook for short-term volunteer teaching based on the experiences of our summer trips which is planned for publication in January 2006. It will include our teaching modules, practical notes on what went well and what did not go well in the field, information on educational psychology and teaching theories, and suggestions for planning a short-term volunteer program. We will distribute the book to SVRS societies and other organizations that volunteer in China's countryside. We plan to update this book regularly with experiences of RCEF and other groups and as more knowledge about how to execute quality education in rural China accumulates.
3. **NATIVE SOIL EDUCATION TEXTBOOKS:** We participate in a collaboration with Chinese non-governmental organizations *Tianxia Xi* and *Green Watershed* to create locally-based environmental education textbooks in Nasi County, Yunnan Province. The project will include a summer camp for local students and professional development sessions for teachers on how to implement this new "native soil" curriculum in the classroom.

For more information about RCEF, please visit our website at [www.ruralchina.org](http://www.ruralchina.org), or email us at [info@ruralchina.org](mailto:info@ruralchina.org). For more information about SVRS, please visit their website at [www.3nong.org](http://www.3nong.org).

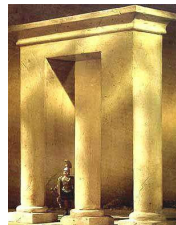
**Box 1: Examples of teaching modules**

*Visual illusions*

Here are some examples of visual illusions:



(a)



(b)



(c)

(a) It looks as if square A is much darker than square B, but you can check that they actually have the same color! (b) How many pillars are there, two or three? (c) What happens to the horse when you turn the picture clockwise by  $90^\circ$ ?



The Visual Illusions module had several objectives:

1. To develop students' observation skills.
2. To demonstrate that some things we see are not what they seem to be, and that some things can be perceived in different ways.
3. To give a basic introduction about human vision and the human brain.
4. To let students enjoy some interesting art work.

One of our volunteers, who taught primary school students in the Shandong site, reported:

“The children were very interested in the illusions. They seemed in awe with many of the pictures and often lapsed into periods of quiet ponder. There were few outbursts, other than from the excitement for seeing the images. However, the students had difficulty expressing their thoughts and lacked the habit of thinking up their own answers. It was clear that usually, their individual opinions were not valued; they focused mostly on pleasing the teacher. The Visual Illusions class was unique from anything they had been taught before, and it took them a while to get used to thinking up explanations. After some hints about possible explanations, or about techniques to verify the effects, the children were able to carry forth some comments.”

### *Quiz*

Quiz was an example of teaching factual knowledge in an entertaining way. The class was split up into three or more teams. Students enjoyed the competitive aspect, but we emphasized that participating was more important than winning. Here are some examples of the questions we used:

1. How many minutes are there in a day?
2. How far away is the moon?
3. What is the largest country in the world?
4. When did the dinosaurs go extinct?
5. You can see it, but you cannot touch it. You can smell it, but you cannot hear it. It goes upwards, but it never arrives. What is this?
6. Arrange the numbers 1 to 9 in a 3-by-3 field, such that the sum in each horizontal, vertical, or diagonal line is the same (magic square).

Many questions, such as 2 to 6 here, required the students to cooperate with their teammates, because each team had to come up with one answer. After telling the correct answer, the teacher also gave some interesting background or context information. One of our volunteer teachers reported:

“The response I got from the students was excellent. Many of them found the questions interesting, and the dynamic class atmosphere made the students all excited and enthusiastic. The competitive nature of the quiz also made the students all engaged and attentive during class. There was a high level of participation and active involvement in group discussions when the need arose.”





*Community research*

Report by a volunteer in Miyun:

“We started with a discussion about where knowledge comes from. It was clear that the students had not thought about this before and we had to trace the process of creating knowledge step by step. I started by asking them how the knowledge they learn in school is created. They said that it is from their textbooks. I asked how the people who write the textbook get the knowledge, and they said from books. I asked who writes the books and they answered ‘authors’. The authors, they said, get the knowledge from investigation. I asked them if they wanted to do their own research and write their own reports. The expression on some of their faces reflected that it was a novel idea to them and that they were curious. I asked them about topics they were interested in knowing more about. After a discussion, we decided on four topics: parents’ stories, mushrooms in the hills, legends, and the origin of the river.

In the next class, we discussed methods of research, such as observation, interviewing villagers and looking up information in books. I also asked them to suggest ways to present the information they would find. After considering various methods such as lectures, plays and books, they decided on posters. After class, our volunteer teachers and the 支农 volunteers brought the students out into the village to investigate. For instance, the mushroom group went to collect mushrooms and to ask their grandparents about them. The students seemed to be excited and to have a sense of accomplishment after collecting their data.

In the next class, I discussed with the groups individually about analyzing and organizing their data as they began to make their posters. In the last class, we stuck the posters on the walls, and the groups took turns presenting their results. Most of the students participated in presenting. Questions were raised after every presentation. Some students even challenged each others’ results.

When asking students about our teaching, many students spoke specifically about the community research module. None of the students had done their own research before. Many of them said that interviewing and presenting boosted their confidence. Some said that they were nervous when interviewing for the first time, but that it became easier as they went along. One student in the mushroom group said that working on the research project made her more conscientious, because if she gave incorrect information, she could cause someone to eat a poisonous mushroom.”

**Box 2: Some feedback**

*Teacher comment (Yi County, Hebei):*

I feel that the local teachers here should learn something from you. You taught very animatedly and used many methods that could keep the students’ attention. For example, in math class when you explained a problem involving



bricks, you actually brought in bricks to demonstrate the problem. The students loved it. In English class, you encouraged students to speak more, which was good. Further, whenever you had a problem, you first looked to yourself to find a cause and were very willing to change your ways based on student feedback. This is very difficult for our local teachers to do.

*Middle school student comment:*

In just eight days, the volunteers gave me the feelings I never had before: confidence, courage, and approval. I may not have learned much knowledge but I gained a lot of study strategies and principles I can use for a lifetime. I was very happy and enjoyed these eight days. I really wish time could stay still.

*Middle school student comment:*

All of my classmates love your lively and intriguing strategies of teaching which involved everyone. We usually are too serious in class and lack participation. If all classes could be like yours, that would be good.

*Middle school student comment:*

Even though this is the first time for you teaching, you were very conscientious. The way you teach is interesting and enjoyable. Our middle school teacher teaches in an rigid way. You are very hardworking and your voice during class is strong and clear!

*Middle school student comment:*

Since you came to teach our English course, our class was no longer so dull like before. Your coming brought us happiness and enjoyment. I hope you will teach us more games like today because they bring more fun to class and give us more confidence about learning English.

*Middle school student comment:*

I think the teaching strategies that you used were very good. Your way of teaching is lively and interesting. These classes taught us things we had never come in contact with before. I really don't want you to leave. The days we spent together were very happy. You taught English songs and made me realize the importance of learning English. I hope you two will come back and teach us English again.

*RCEF Volunteer comment:*

I learnt so much, enjoyed so much, and experienced so much. It's the most meaningful thing I have done in my past year.

**Box 3: Comments by a Chinese volunteer**

Xiaoxia Sun is a graduate student in Education at Beijing Normal University.



As a volunteer of SVRS, she went with four international volunteers to a village in Miyun.

*Some thoughts and impressions*

I was very excited and touched to see so many international volunteers come from thousands of miles away to work alongside us as teammates. It also made me feel even more deeply a sense of responsibility towards rural areas.

Working alongside the international volunteers was a memorable experience. We had nine people on the team that went to Miyun County's Xiwanzi Village, and four of them were international volunteers. Originally, the international volunteers were supposed to be in charge of teaching and the mainland volunteers in charge of community activities. However, in practice, the division of labor was not so strict. In the mornings, the international volunteers led classes using curriculum based on the local environment. With kindness and patience, they encouraged students to think deeply and critically, leading the children to observe the mushrooms growing in the hills, interview villagers, and present their findings in hand-drawn posters. Through these activities, the children came up with their own conclusions. For example: "The prettier the mushroom, the more poisonous it is," or, "People all around us are worthy of respect." The entire teaching program was implemented very well and was a highlight of our trip. The international volunteers also enthusiastically joined us in our community support activities, like building cooperatives, computer training, and sang with us loudly as we walked to villages to survey households and hold outdoor concerts. Throughout, their genuine warmheartedness, sincere curiosity and ability to endure harsh conditions without complaint deeply moved and inspired me. We worked together as a team very well and our partnership enriched the whole process.

Ten days passed by very quickly. Will our activities leave the impact on the local community that we hoped for? It is just a beginning for our rural China education program. We still have a long road ahead and cannot expect too much from a single activity. But with the help of volunteers from China and all over the world, I feel increasingly confident that we will be a great help for the improvement of the development and education of rural China.