

Students set out to alleviate 'poverty of spirit'

Most university students in China have their sights firmly set on future job and study opportunities in what appears to be an increasingly acquisitive society.

However, a network of student volunteer brigades has embraced the cause of rural development and peasant empowerment – in an echo of the days forty years ago when Chairman Mao sent 'educated youth' down to the countryside to learn from the peasants.

Diane Geng joined a volunteer brigade in Shandong Province. She reports here on their motivations, methods, and philosophy of 'rural reconstruction'

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Since the late 1990s, dozens of rural-focused, student-run volunteer societies have sprung up in higher education institutions across the country. Some of the societies engage with rural migrants in cities, but their staple work is to organise groups of volunteers to visit rural areas during vacations. Over 120 such societies are connected in a national 'College Student Volunteers for Rural Support and Surveying'¹ network that was founded in 2000 by renowned agricultural economist Wen Tiejun (温铁军). This organisation differs from the government-sponsored China Young Volunteers Association, which also organises rural trips but whose volunteers are hosted and facilitated by local government officials. The Student Volunteers for Rural Support (SVRS), by contrast, make their own arrangements and try to maintain independence from local authorities.

The Beijing-based SVRS does not exert strict control over individual societies' activities but, rather, aims to deepen volunteers' understanding of rural problems and train them in rural developmental tools. It also matches volunteers to village sites. The main advisor, Liu Laoshi (刘老石), receives frequent calls from village leaders who have heard about the students' activities and want to sign up their communities for a visit.

SVRS strongly encourages individual school societies to adopt specific villages as long-term project sites where they can develop deeper relationships with villagers and make repeated visits to over time. Currently there are more than 20 such 'experimental sites'.

The organisation also maintains an online forum (www.3nong.org) to share volunteer information, post feedback on recent trips, and coordinate future events.

Most importantly, the SVRS conducts workshops that bring leaders from various colleges together to exchange ideas and experiences and to receive introductory training in rural development theory and strategies. On a recent weekend, close to 40 students from 12 colleges gathered in Beijing for two days of intensive training,

bonding and discussion of the difficulties they encountered working in villages. The weekend after the workshop the students broke into two groups and visited villages in Hebei Province to put into practice what they had learned. When they return to their schools, they are expected to pass on the training and experience to other members of their local societies.

Revitalising peasant confidence

The rural development strategy promoted by SVRS is known as 'New Rural Reconstruction' (*xin xiangcun jianshe* 新农村 建设). It draws on the 'rural reconstruction' movement of China's Republican period,² and is encapsulated in the old saying 'To help someone, first help their will.' (扶人先扶志). A driving idea of the strategy is that peasants' loss of 'spirit' (*jingsheng* 精神) is at the root of rural stagnation and poverty and that rural development projects should focus on the problems of the rural community and all its inhabitants – elderly people, women, children – not just farmers and issues of agricultural production.

Revitalising peasants' self-confidence and empowering them to help themselves is seen as a more effective and sustainable way to inject new life into a village than simply giving money or material goods. Successful rural development should thus take an internal perspective and consider how local political structures and peasants' lifestyles contribute to rural problems, instead of focusing only on external causes like market failures, non-competitiveness or lack of technology. Inquisitive college students, even without specialist training in agriculture or economics, are well-suited

² The original popular education and rural reconstruction movement was associated with Dr. Y. C. James Yen (晏阳初 1893-1990), who argued that 'The basic problems of the people – poverty, ignorance, disease and civic inertia – interlock. To address one problem, we must address all.' He also stressed the innate capacity of rural people to develop themselves, and set out to work with them 'Not out of pity but out of respect for their potential for growth and development, both as individuals and as communities.' For more, see www.iirr.org, the website of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, which Yen established in the Philippines in 1960.

¹ 大学生支农调研志愿者 (*daxuesheng zhinong diaoyan zhiyuanzhe*); abbreviated here to Student Volunteers for Rural Support (SVRS).

to explore the internal social issues of the rural community through the most simple and direct means: spending time asking questions and listening to peasants in informal conversation.

To achieve a revival of village spirit, volunteers set out to help peasants found and participate in their own grass-roots organisations. It is hoped that this will encourage attitudinal change – from defeated resignation to confidence and empowerment. SVRS believes that this should increase peasant's ability to confront formidable pressures from government policies or the global market economy.

Part of the volunteers' role is to identify and cultivate capable villagers who have the respect and influence to revive their fellow villagers' spirits and unify them into rural cooperatives. In lending support and advice to these individuals, the college students give them more credibility and 'face' in the eyes of their neighbours, spurring the creation of civil society in the village.

That, at any rate is the theory. Putting it into practice is a slow and difficult process, however, as peasants are risk-adverse and wary of change – and by no means all of them have benefited from the social and economic changes of the past decade.

In the field in Shandong

Over the October 2004 National Holiday week, I joined a volunteer group, made up of students from six different university societies, on a trip to a village on the outskirts of Jinan, Shandong. We paid the villagers to let us stay in the local primary school and provided a local woman with the money and ingredients to prepare three meals a day for us in her home.

Upon our arrival, a large, red banner warmly welcomed the college students to 'help and investigate' the village. However, we soon found that some villagers were suspicious or confused about why we were there, assuming that we were all 'sent from Beijing' even though our number also included students from Tianjin and Shenyang. The students were irked by the frequent question, 'What government ministry sent you to us?' but the villagers' assumption was an understandable legacy of the Cultural Revolution, the influence of which was still apparent. We held our meetings in a run-down, little-used community centre, now full of cobwebs and straw, that was called the 'Educated Youths Building'. The red kerchiefs the students tied around their arms, as well as their little red books full of song lyrics, also conjured up images of bygone Red Guard days. In a way, the volunteers were purposely trying to revive that legacy of

interaction between peasants and college students, but adapting it to a very different 21st century situation.

As could be expected given the inexperience of the young people, the Shandong volunteer trip was as much a learning experience for the students as it was an opportunity for them to help villagers. In fact, the earliest SVRS trips were designed as no more than eye-opening village 'tours' to heighten young people's awareness of rural China. While the trips still have this purpose, they have also evolved into efforts to raise villagers' social consciousness and make a practical and 'meaningful' contribution to the village. This usually involves a combination of volunteer teaching in the primary school, investigation, and grassroots organising, depending on the interests and abilities of the students.

In Shandong much of our time was spent engaging villagers in informal interviews on a variety of social and economic issues, ranging from land confiscation to crop yields and inter-generational relationships. The discussions greatly enlightened the volunteers as to the hardships facing the villagers, and the villagers expressed happiness that elite students would take time to listen to their concerns. However, the students' abilities to resolve the serious legal issues and injustices many villagers encountered was limited. At most, they could promise to write letters to government officials on their behalf or do more research upon returning to college.

The quality of volunteer teaching varies according to preparation and experience. The school vacation provides an opportunity to teach village children subjects that are not normally covered in their curriculum, and to expose them to a wider world; but the actual situation sometimes looked more like chaotic mass babysitting. Nevertheless, the mere presence and goodwill of the college students impressed the village children, who peppered the students with questions about university life, and begged them for autographs and phone numbers to keep in touch. Some volunteers have since started corresponding with children they met in the village, hoping to serve as role models for academic progress.

Recognising that in many villages most of the men have migrated to work in cities, the volunteers work to organise those who remain behind – the elderly and the women. For example, some women's societies have been set up where village women work together to produce handicrafts and earn a little extra income. On nice evenings, they also hold public dances, waving their scarves and swaying in time to the lively beat of the *niu yang'er*, a traditional Chinese line dance. In

Shandong, we asked the wizened old men and women sitting out on their front stoops whether they would be interested in having a place where they could gather to play chess, drink tea, and socialise. Some replied that they were too busy, while others were supportive. By the next day, several volunteers were busy sweeping out a dusty room in the 'Educated Youth Building' and fitting it out with donated Chinese chess sets.

Setting up information networks is a main focus for the students. Recent information about government policies and agricultural technology is rarely transmitted to the people they affect in rural areas, due to lack of access to media, the lack of capacity of government extension systems and, in some cases, downright obstruction by local officials. Villagers must often go to great lengths to locate and purchase materials from far-away cities. The college students can play a valuable role in taking villagers' requests and tracking down the information they need, as well as generally disseminating current political, legal, and scientific knowledge relevant to villagers. For example, I was asked to buy materials on organic farming to send to a villager. This summer, several bands of hardy volunteers cycled through the countryside for several weeks, stopping in villages along the way to give out materials and information on central government policies and recent laws concerning peasants and rural issues.

Urging cooperation through song

The students also adapted their services to the specific needs of the village. Soon after we arrived, the village head informed us that their Rural Economy Development Cooperative was moribund because the members had little faith in its effectiveness. Students first interviewed the co-op founders to learn more about its deterioration and then convened community meetings each evening to explain in practical terms why and how an economic cooperative could improve the lives of all members. Advantages like buying fertiliser in bulk, coordinating the planting and selling of crops were illustrated with figures and anecdotes from other successful village co-ops. Trying to convince risk-adverse farmers to invest in an unproven group effort was difficult, and demonstrated the extent to which villagers mistrusted each other.

To inspire some community spirit, the students – all unabashed, robust singers – belted out traditional socialist melodies, some with the words changed to reflect the times. The students felt that lively songs like 'Unity is Stronger than Iron and Steel' (团结就是力量) could convey their

message and vigour to peasants in a way that lectures and manuals could not. After singing, the students facilitated discussion and debate among farmers, trying to revive their grassroots organisation long into the night. Even after we retired to the primary school to sleep on desks that doubled as our beds for the week, some volunteers continued to whisper in the dark about how to overcome the villagers' apathy and mistrust.

On the last evening, the students had planned a social gathering. In preparation, we canvassed the village with hand-written announcements, made home-visits to invite families, and recruited peasants who could sing, dance, recite, or otherwise put on a show. The children participated enthusiastically, rehearsing many songs, dances and short skits. One of the college student volunteers was especially good at mentoring the musical acts, providing advice that these children had probably rarely received. The event was a rousing success and one elderly lady told the students that this was the first gathering of its kind in the village in twenty years.

The volunteer perspective

After each trip, volunteers are required to write an analysis of their experiences. Their reports are reviewed by invited agriculture and development experts and the best are awarded prizes. Some have been published in *China Reform* magazine and five anthologies of the best reports have been printed, covering activities from July 2002 to March 2004.

What, then, is the significance of this kind of student-initiated volunteering in a country where, historically, most volunteerism was government-prompted and enforced? Undertaking hard labour and making sacrifices to achieve idealistic goals were common in the national culture for decades, but in today's market-influenced, competitive society, spending precious time and energy to help out less fortunate strangers is a relatively rare, and some would even say unaffordable, proposition. Many volunteers admit matter-of-factly to being oddities among their peers. 'My room-mates don't understand at all why I like to participate in this kind of activity' said a second year student at the Central University of Finance and Economics. 'They tease me, as if I have some strange disorder.' Family members can also be less than supportive, as one veteran volunteer and society founder reports: 'My mother still doesn't understand why every winter after I finish final exams, I go on a trip to some village instead of going straight home to see her!' In fact, rural development volunteers are often looked down upon as second-rate students with dim future prospects, who waste their

potential by going to the countryside to labour and burn in the sun. One volunteer's friends asked her half-seriously if she would return as backwards and ignorant as a peasant after her time working in a mountain village.

Indeed, despite campus populations numbering in the tens of thousands, most school societies I interviewed had around 100 members, with perhaps 40 regularly attending meetings. One of Beijing's top technical schools, for example, had over 20,000 students, but the rural support society had attracted only a few dozen members, not all of whom were active. Beijing Normal University, with its stronger tradition of public service, has one of the oldest rural support societies, with about 130 names on the roster; but leaders said that only a core group of 30-40 showed up regularly to meetings.

When I praised one student's commitment to rural development and volunteerism, he replied: 'It's not that I'm more selfless or dedicated. It's just that China is a developing country. It is undergoing huge change and social instabilities so there are more problems for us to work on.' However, education in China is structured around teaching knowledge that can be tested in paper exams rather than encouraging creative and diverse responses to real world situations. Thus, most students have little time or incentive to pursue extracurricular projects. 'The university is completely isolated from society' said one volunteer leader. 'Physically, we are blocked off by walls and gates, and in accordance with traditional practice, do not concern ourselves with the outside community.'

One of the original inspirations for SVRS founders was the thought that college students lack a sense of social responsibility. The first trips to villages were designed as consciousness-raising activities, to take students out of the ivory tower and expose them to the realities of rural life where 70% of their fellow citizens live. As a veteran volunteer and society leader recalled, 'In the beginning, the graduate student founders of our society were inspired by a historical perspective of the many wrongs rural areas have suffered over centuries of Chinese history. But now, our members aren't familiar with all that history and are mostly influenced by their own, personal experiences in villages. After they come back, they are inspired to participate and take action.' Gaining first-hand understanding of rural areas serves to break the narrow mould of academic learning that college students have been accustomed to.

Students today are not exposed to rural development history or theory. Most have never read Mao's writings on rural-urban inequalities and peasant problems.

'Students today barely know about anything before 1979,' said one student, who was himself reading the selected works of Mao Zedong for the first time. 'I think all the volunteers should bring a copy of this book and read it during the trips.'

Since they receive little encouragement from their schools or peers, the volunteers tend to act independently and have different, personal reasons for wanting to better understand rural China. Many come from rural villages themselves and profess a strong desire to use their knowledge and position to help improve the rural problems they knew so well. Other students who grew up in cities often just wanted to see what the countryside was like. 'I thought it would be fun,' explained a first-time volunteer from an urban background. 'I wanted to try something new and it looks good to have this kind of volunteer work on my resume.' For those students who become repeat volunteers, however, motivation becomes much harder to define. 'I don't know why I keep doing this!' said the second year student whose room-mates teased her. 'I can't explain it clearly, except to say I feel it is meaningful for me. I know I can't help the villagers much or have much lasting impact, but I just like doing it anyways.'

A few of the volunteers I met were studying rural development or social work but the vast majority were majoring in subjects like International Economics, Business Management and Computer Science. Thus, on a practical level, the increased understanding they gain about China's social inequities will probably not have much effect on their post-graduate plans. One volunteer, a graduate student in Human Resources, explained his attitude this way: 'This time in our lives is like a dream. We can participate in these kinds of activities and work to improve social problems that we are passionate about. But after we graduate, dream time ends'

A handful of especially dedicated volunteers have withdrawn from school for one year to do full-time rural development work, spending months at a time in one village. Others have gone on to become full-time staff for SVRS or other development NGOs. SVRS hopes to start a foundation to raise funds to support the living costs of some full-time volunteers in the future. However, lack of funding for such endeavours, and the pressure to fulfil family and social expectations of high salary and prestigious jobs mean that most volunteers will soon re-focus their attention on a career related to their studies. Some professed a hope to some day return to working on social problems, but were unsure of how they would actually do so.

Most active members of the societies are first and second year students. The third-year leaders readily admit they will probably be out of the picture next year, even as they are currently pouring energy and enthusiasm into leading the trips and trainings. Even for the most dedicated volunteers, their final year at college is reserved for preparing for graduate school entrance exams and looking for jobs in a tight market. After spending a weekend with other volunteers, passionately debating rural development strategies during a training workshop, one senior told me he could not make the next weekend's follow-up village trip. These two days of discussion and exchange of views on how to tackle China's biggest social problem would probably be the last of his college career: he was busy getting his resume ready for interviews with international investment banks in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

The high turnover of volunteers and inexperience of the younger students to some extent conflicts with the more organised and specific rural development strategies that SVRS is trying to promote through intensive training workshops and the adoption of long-term project sites.

Furthermore, even when they are prepared to risk the disapproval of family and school, money is often a factor that prevents students engaging in these activities. Due to a shortage of funds, from the start of the current school year SVRS has discontinued its previous policy of covering one-third to one-half of volunteers' trip expenditures. A two-year grant from the Ford Foundation, which provided the bulk of the organization's funding, ended in October; so individual school societies have become responsible for raising funds. As a result, SVRS has seen a marked decline in active schools, with less than half the usual number of trips during the October 2004 break. Some societies reduced costs by going to less remote villages. Others applied for meagre grants from their universities or solicited donations from local businesses. Many activities depend on volunteers' ability to pay their own way, and this greatly limits numbers. Train fares, room and board of our week-long trip to Shandong amounted to about CNY 200 (USD 25) per person, and this is a prohibitive amount for many students, particularly those from poor, rural backgrounds. According to the Ministry of Education, about 20% of all students in institutions of higher education have financial difficulties just paying school tuition, much less extracurricular activities.

Similarly, the winter training that SVRS holds in Beijing for representatives from school societies nationwide was cancelled this year because the

organisation cannot afford to reimburse travel costs for all the delegates, some who come from as far away as Guangdong and Guizhou. Instead, SVRS will try to hold regional trainings, with staff travelling to different schools to hold workshops. However, as the profile of these students' volunteer activities rises and membership expands, quality control and accountability increase in importance.

'The experience transforms them'

In the August 2004 edition of *China Reform* magazine, representatives of the SVRS volunteer network published an open letter to Premier Wen Jia Bao, whose well-publicised visits to rural areas have been seen as symbols of the central government's increased concern for rural issues. The letter expresses the hopes and ideals that drive the students to persevere despite lack of funding and disdain from peers, their families, and society: 'We see we have brought the villagers some hope, but we have also rescued ourselves and seen our future. We come back transformed, bringing with us heavy reflections and firm determination. The more we go to villages, the more we feel the road is long and our responsibilities very great. Every generation has its historical mission. We volunteers have chosen to support peasants. The *san nong* problem has a deep, thick, and strong history, but our call to our fellow college students is to boldly throw ourselves into it heart and soul.'

Alongside this letter, the magazine printed an essay by Bai Yali (白亚丽), the head of Tianjin University of Science and Technology's rural volunteer society, who is currently taking a one-year leave from school to work full-time in a village in the mountains of Hubei. She reported the reactions of friends and teachers who consider her crazy, courageous, or wasteful to use her potential as an excellent student and cadre on 'backward' peasants in the mountains. 'I don't feel what I'm doing is radical at all,' she writes in response. 'I am acting on strong emotions, but I think young people should have zeal and a sense of duty. What are university students of this new era supposed to be like? I believe that doing something to help peasants is a manifestation of the little conscience we have left.' Careful to differentiate between numbers of organisations and the actual health and effectiveness of this movement of university students, she wrote, 'Even though we have over 100 rural support societies nationwide, everybody is still using various subjective and objective reasons to justify touching only lightly on the issues and leaving in a flash. Those left

over, really working, are a silent, small number. I'm sure I am not the only one that is left perplexed. Sometimes I really wish that there were other volunteers with me so I would no longer be alone. I wish that one day, all university students will be caught up in the tide to support peasants and that the whole society will vigorously discuss the *san nong* issue.'

These gnawing social problems are indeed intruding more and more into the urban, privileged consciousness, especially through increased media attention to the gap between rich and poor, urban and rural citizens. However, there is no substitute for first-hand experience and SVRS plays an invaluable role in exposing the elite of China's younger generation to the realities of rural areas. If they can be influenced to think about the rural-urban gap now, they may avoid a rude awakening in the future as China's social inequalities grow more unsustainable.

But how to get young people involved in the first place? 'First, you tell them it's really fun and advertise it like a vacation to the countryside!' explained Liu Laoshi, the director of SVRS. 'Then, after they've been there, the experience transforms them.' In his opinion, reviving students' latent social conscience is as important as reviving peasants' spirits in the countryside. A poverty of spirit affects the elite schools of higher education as much as the most backwards rural hamlet, and it is fitting that peasants and college students should help each other alleviate this poverty. 'Villages are better than any university!' one student was quoted as saying in the letter to Wen Jiabao. With their expanded perspective on a vibrant, throbbing, raw society that includes both rural and urban realities, most volunteers understand that their efforts are not for China's millions of disadvantaged rural citizens alone, but for the good of the entire nation.