

From Classroom to Countryside: The Case of Service Learning through Rural Volunteerism by Chinese College Students

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Abstract

Higher education in China has historically been a privilege few in the population can attain. Although enrollment in Chinese tertiary institutions has risen considerably in the past few years, college students still possess an elite status in Chinese culture, especially in rural areas from which only 30% of university students come. In stark contrast to their Cultural Revolution counterparts who were sent to the countryside to “learn from villagers,” present-day Chinese students are taught abstract societal values and generally lack the incentive and knowledge to develop—much less act upon—a sense of social responsibility to rural development or the well-being of the rural population which still makes up 69% of China. Applying their intellect to examining and solving real social problems is an area that has traditionally not been rewarded by the higher education system or future employers. However, due to an increasingly competitive post-graduate job market and shifting university policies on curriculum content, service learning experiences that bring students in touch with the “real world” have recently been given increasing recognition and promotion by government officials and university administrators.

This paper introduces an early pioneer of the service learning model for university students, which was initiated before the current interest from the government and schools began. Inspired and supported by a model founded at a rural affairs magazine in the late 1990s, dozens of independent student-run volunteer societies have sprung up in colleges in nearly every province and municipality. Their members make up a vibrant network of students who have adopted the development of rural China as their cause, aiming to impact the rural issues involving agriculture, rural areas, and farmers, collectively known as the *san nong* (三农) problem. This paper describes their development methods, known as “rural reconstruction,” their impact on rural communities, and the impact that the experience has in turn on the volunteers’ social awareness and values.

Since 1949, the direction and content of Chinese higher education system has been linked to varying degrees with the rural lifestyle that dominated most of China, and which still represents over two thirds of its population today. In the 1950s and early 60s, educational policy for college and secondary school graduates focused on developing both politically committed as well as technically skilled human resources. Students' school days were split between studying academic subjects and acquiring practical experience working in factories and fields. However, the start of the Cultural Revolution shifted the emphasis of education almost entirely towards political education. Committees were set up to take charge of schools and implement a curriculum formed around revolutionary ideology and indoctrination. In an effort to tear down the barriers between ordinary people and elite educational institutes, work groups of soldiers, workers, and farmers were invited to lecture in, and run universities. Accordingly, university students were required to “*shang shan, xia xiang*” (go to the countryside to work on farms), or labor in factories and be “re-educated” as villagers. University entrance exams which had been a Chinese tradition since the times of Confucius were abandoned and new students were admitted to university based on their work records and loyalty to the Communist Party. Eleven years later, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping reinstated the university entrance exam and between 1977 and 1979, 18 million Chinese students took the test, with about 880,000, or 5%, becoming the first students in the modern Chinese higher education system². In keeping with his general policy of reforming and opening up the Chinese economy and society, Deng placed strong emphasis on science and technology in higher education. However, the pursuit of modernization has been such that linkages between higher education and rural areas have weakened considerably. University students today are generally far-removed from the realities of the countryside, its needs, and the daily lives of rural people.

The start of the twenty-first century has seen the fastest development in higher education in Chinese history. New classroom buildings, dormitories and science parks are being built on nearly every campus and the number of university students has risen dramatically, with 11.09 million undergraduates enrolled in 2003, compared to just 3.4 million in 1998³. However, of the 3.38 million graduates projected for 2005—a one-year increase of 580,000—the Ministry of Education expects that over a quarter of these will be unable to find employment, leading to widespread anxiety and insecurity among college students about their post-graduate prospects.⁴

The central government stopped matching college graduates with jobs in the mid-1990s, thus reducing the immediate material returns to higher education. As a result, many students and members of society at large are questioning the value and meaning of higher education. One female graduate at a recent job fair was quoted by Chinese media asking rhetorically, "If you [had] known that after 10-year[s] of hard learning and your family's great efforts to support [you through school], [that] you [could only] get work with a salary of [several] hundred *yuan*, [would] you still choose to study in universities? I [would] prefer to work as a nursery maid earlier, who [is at least] supported with free food and [a] living place."⁵

At a recent meeting focusing on the problem of college student employment, Deputy Director-General of the Employment Skill Training Guidance Center of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, Mr. Chen Yu, remarked that the market was facing serious structural unemployment, in which many graduates cannot find jobs but there is also a

dearth of suitable candidates for posts in poorer, western regions, especially at the local, grassroots level. This uneven distribution of labor supply and demand is expected to remain a problem for at least the first twenty years of this century and as a result, the Ministry of Education and the China Human Resources Development are encouraging college students to go to western regions and rural areas where there are more job opportunities. The media report by Beijing Evening News wrote that, “in this way, [graduates] can realize their value,” and listed an “employment social benefits lecture tour, employment priority enterprises, and an internship scheme” as ways the campaign would reach out to students⁶.

According to official statistics, the 12 provinces and autonomous regions which make up China’s underdeveloped “West” is home to nearly 30% of the entire country’s population, but only 15.5% of educated professionals and skilled workers⁷. As part of the central government’s overall strategy to send more resources and investment to help develop the West—and to help address the unemployment problem—the Communist Youth League Central Committee and the Ministry of Education jointly launched a campaign in 2003 to recruit college graduates to serve in impoverished counties and towns for 1-2 years. In the program’s first year, 6,000 volunteers were sent to 191 poor counties to work in the fields of education, public health, farming technology and poverty alleviation. Since its inception in 2003, the campaign has involved 30,000 students, most of whom studied agriculture, forestry, hydraulic engineering, medicine or teacher training. Volunteers who complete their tenure are entitled to priority in job hunting and graduate study opportunities.

Although the western volunteering project has received much media attention and promotion, its scale is still quite small. This year, over 50,000 applications were received for about 11,000 openings⁸, representing only a very small proportion of the some three million graduating seniors. One reason for this is the limited experience university students have in the “real world” before graduation. In the traditional education system, learning is lecture-based with few opportunities to accumulate life experiences that directly address societal issues. Most students rarely leave the walled-in grounds of their school and thus have little opportunity to explore society’s needs or their ability to make a difference in a community.

Recognizing the need to increase college students’ contact with society, since the end of 2004, the central government has been strongly promoting a “societal practice” component to higher education as a means of enhancing students’ political and moral learning. Each school has its own program for implementing this, and often “social practice” is defined broadly. It can entail internships in businesses or work units, participating in volunteer projects, and conducting societal surveys or investigations of disadvantaged groups like manual laborers and farmers. Qinghua University sophomore Li Qiang (李强) recently became famous for writing a report of his observations in the countryside called “Eight Days Village Journal” (乡村八记), which was passed on to Premier Wen Jiabao. In a letter commending Li’s “distinct”, “detailed”, and “lively,” reporting, Wen wrote, “It is so rare for a second year undergraduate to pay attention to rural issues. His report gives the reader a real and enlightening picture of the conditions in the countryside. In order to have a sense of social responsibility, one must seek a deep understanding and caring for the country and its people.”⁹

In 1997, ten ministries under the central government mobilized the “*San Xia Xiang*” movement which aims to bring technology, health and cultural support to the countryside. Universities have played an important role in this campaign by sending groups of students to villages during school breaks to bring entertainment, material, and technical aid to rural people. Since the activities are part of a government policy, the logistics of these trips are usually organized through government channels and students are often hosted by local officials who direct their schedules. As a result, the ability to interact freely with villagers or probe issues off of the official agenda—especially those which may not be in the interest of the local authorities—is limited. Contributing to community building beyond giving material aid to villages is difficult because of the short-term and “official” nature of the trips.

However, there are student organizations which seem similar on the surface to “*San Xia Xiang*” (三下乡), which are independent of the university or government. 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 school breaks. While they are usually registered as student clubs, they generally remain self-governed and financially independent, choosing their own projects and relying on their own money or grant applications to pay for them.

Over 120 such societies are connected in a national ‘College Student Volunteers for Rural Support and Surveying’ⁱ network that was founded in 2000 by renowned agricultural economist Wen Tiejun (温铁军) who is now the Dean of the School of Agriculture and Rural Development at Renmin University in Beijing (农业与农村发展学院). Unlike the China Young Volunteers Association, the Student Volunteers for Rural Support (SVRS) make their own arrangements with villages they want to visit, and try to maintain independence from local authorities.

One of the original inspirations for SVRS founders was the thought that college students lack an understanding of society and opportunities to develop and exercise their 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. Most Chinese 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. 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 want to see what the countryside is like.

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

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

developmental tools. It also matches volunteers to village sites and 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 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. For example, in July 2005 close to 100 students from all over the country gathered just outside of 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 teams and visited villages in four different provinces 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.

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

To achieve a revival of village spirit, volunteers set out to help villagers 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 villagers’ 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

ⁱⁱ 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.

them into grassroots, independent 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 villagers are risk-adverse and wary of change. By no means have all of them benefited from the dramatic social and economic improvements of the past decade. Indeed, China has one of the world’s biggest gaps between urban and rural incomes, with urban residents spending and consuming at five, or even six times the rate of rural residents, after taking into account social services like medical insurance and education expenditures.¹⁰

Gaining first-hand understanding of rural areas and this gaping inequality serves to break the narrow mould of academic learning that college students have been accustomed to. 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.

Investigation can consist of engaging villagers in informal interviews on a variety of social and economic issues, ranging from land use issues to crop yields and inter-generational relationships. The discussions aim to enlighten the volunteers as to the hardships facing the villagers, and to encourage the villagers by showing to them that elite students would take time to listen to their concerns. However, the students’ abilities to resolve serious legal issues and injustices villagers may encounter is limited.

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. It is not unusual for volunteers, upon their return, to start corresponding with children they met in the village, hoping to serve as role models for academic achievement.

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.

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, volunteers have been asked to buy materials on organic farming to send to villagers. In 2004, several teams of students 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 villagers and rural issues.

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.

Student-initiated volunteering marks a significant change 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 have 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. One student described his participation this way: '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.'

A minority of the volunteers are studying agriculture 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. However, in general, 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 or looking for jobs in a tight market. For example, after a weekend training workshop in October 2004, one senior announced he could not make the next weekend’s follow-up village trip. The 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 2004; so individual school societies have become responsible for raising funds. In 2005, SVRS received a grant from the US-based Rural China Education Foundation which is helped fund its training and trips in May and Summer, but the number of schools it could offer subsidies to declined. Some societies reduce costs by going to less remote villages. Others apply for meagre grants from their universities or solicit 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 on average are amount to about CNY 200-300 (USD 25-29) per person, and this is a prohibitive amount for many students, particularly those from poor, rural back-grounds. 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.

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 villagers. 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’ villagers 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 villagers 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 villagers 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.

Most importantly, the SVRS activities are filling a critical gap in returns to education which, from primary school onwards, begin to be directed away from rural areas. The rural investigation and support activities give students some of the first real-world situations to apply their educational knowledge and skills to and in the process, returns some of the benefits of education to helping rural agriculture, people, and villagers. Education raises the level of human capital in a country and perhaps what rural China needs more than anything in this critical period of economic transition and societal upheaval, is educated, capable human resources willing to dedicate time and energy to direct improvement and reform.

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