THE LOCAL PRACTICE OF GLOBAL ASPIRATIONS:
ETHICAL SELF-FORMATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE EDUCATIONAL
VOLUNTEERISM

_____

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Curry School of Education

University of Virginia

_____

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

By

Chenyu Wang, B.A., M.A.

August 2018

Abstract

This dissertation explores how the educational development work enacted by foreign-educated Chinese students in rural China reflects contemporary Chinese thinking about the meaning of an educated person. I use ethnography as the methodological orientation, because my goal is to explicate the emic beliefs, knowledge, and practices concerning rural education in China. Data in this dissertation come from a total fourteen-month ethnographic fieldwork in a volunteer education development organization in Beijing and a county high school in Hunan. I conducted participant observation with the orientation, training, program, and the concluding ceremonies with three short-term programs as well as the daily operation of the NGO itself. I also conducted ethnographic interviews with the volunteer participants and the NGO staff members.

By analyzing the living and teaching experiences of the Chinese volunteers in rural schools, I examine how the overseas-educated young volunteers have forged an ideal personhood that is able to be connected to the soil, or *jie di qi*. Rooted in the concentric model of Chinese selfhood, the *jie di qi* ideal is an authentic cosmopolitan personhood that synthesizes the rural and the urban of China, and the foreign outside of China. In turn, this ideal shapes the volunteers' thinking about "proper" behaviors and curriculum in rural China. It transcends material and cultural boundaries, and has ethical implications. Emphasizing on cultivating the capacity to relate to the Others, this ideal forges an alternative cosmopolitan community in contemporary China.

Moreover, an analysis of the critics within the NGO circle shows that the Chinese cosmopolitan ideal is, in effect, a deep and implicit resistance against the Chinese state's dictation on the ideal personal development scheme. The privileged educational

background of the overseas-educated students enables them to conceptualize an ideal personhood that defies against the Party-State's human capital discourse. Hence, the quest for a cosmopolitan ideal in China reflects the collective search for morality of a new Chinese generation.

My study fills a significant gap in the literature on development and education. It provides an alternative to the dominant narrative that focuses on the production and reproduction of privilege and social structures through educational activities. It also takes seriously the role of ideal and aspiration in educational practices, providing empirical evidence to the further consider the relationship between the present and possibilities and politics of the future. Lastly, it enriches the literature on educational reform in China through a critical look at a collective attempt to rehumanize education in an out-of-school context.

To 2015-2017

Acknowledgement

This dissertation has taken me through a treacherous yet fulfilling journey that I had never imagined. It has brought me to places I have never been, people I have never met, and stories I have never heard about. Through this dissertation, I have grown into who I am now as a person. I could not be more fortunate and grateful to all who generously supported and accompanied me through this journey.

To *Zhiyou Jihua*, in particular, Liu Hong, Fang Zhuoqing, Xu Keke, Luo Can, He Wanxia, and Ge Hao, thank you so much for opening the door of *Zhiyou Jihua* and tolerating me as the "class enemy" for such a long time. Reciprocity might not always be possible, but just WeChat me whenever you need me.

To the volunteers. I am forever indebted to you for the time that we spent together and the conversations in which you opened your hearts to me. If I knew spending time in the field would give me such great friends (and informants) like you, I would probably just be a fieldworker forever. So, thank you for tolerating the ethnographer around you. I would like to specifically thank Chen Danni, Chen Shali, Chen Shengxin, Chen Xinuo, Chen Xinyi, Gao Jie, Gu Jiayue, Guan Jian, Jia Zetong, Jin Mengdi, Lei Manli, Li Ruiyi, Liu Yongye, Peng Junhao, Pu Ai, Shan Shan, Shang Tongyun, Sun Mo, Sun Yan, Tang Yun, Tian Yuan, Wang Guanrong, Wang Linjue, Wang Xiya, Wang Yuxiang, Wang Zekang, Wang Zhongyi, Xu Xin, Yang Dongrui, Zhang Bolun, Zhang Chuyi, Zhang Hanlu, Zhang Haoruo, Zhang Lengyi, and Zhang Meng, for sharing parts of your lives with me. I will always be there for you.

To the students in the partner schools, Chen Chen, Chen Peng, Hong Lei, Huang Mengxin, Hu Zhanpeng, Liu Bofeng, Long Feng, Long Dujuan, Long Zhangyi, Su Qianran, Tang Qin, Tao Yongyu, Yang Hang, Yang Peipei, Yang Zhen, Yang Zicheng, Yu Mingyu, Yu Yifei, Yuan Tanjie, Zhou Fanqi, Zuo Chunrong, and many others. Thank you for sharing part of your lives with me, and bringing me snacks when I ran out of food. I am happy that I am able to keep my promise of graduating roughly around the same time as you do, and I am very proud of you.

To my committee members, Professors Diane Hoffman, Derrick Alridge, Ira Bashkow, Walter Heineke, and Rachel Wahl. I could not have met more brilliant and loving scholars and advisors as you. I will always be your student.

To my graduate school friends, Tashi Dekyid, Alexander Hyers, Fan Mai, Xinyan Peng, Matthew Robinson, Jieun Sung, Elizabeth Wesner, Danielle Wingfield-Smith, Yumin Xiao, Jingcai Ying, Hexuan Zhang, Jinchao Zhao, Tianxin Zhou, and Shi Zhu. Thank you for cheering me up along the way. I am forever indebted for your companionships during my time in Charlottesville.

And to my old friends and professors at the University of Maryland, in particular, Professors Jing Lin, Steve Klees, and Nelly Stromquist, and Linda Marie Pheng, Brent Edwards, Sachi Edwards, and Charles Blake. I hope our personal and professional dialogues would never end.

Then, to a few more whom I would rather leave unnamed.

To the computer engineer. During my final years in Charlottesville, I finally realized how hard it is to be my friend. So I thank you for being my best friend.

To my INTP hater. I am forever grateful that we became roommates the year after I came back from the field. Frankly, I could not imagine how much more painful it could have been during those dark writing days. I will always be your warmest robot; I know you will be mine, too.

And to the person who does not have a name. I thank you for simply making me laugh.

Lastly, to grandma, mom, dad, and cousin. I have never really been a good child (or a good sister), so I thank you for always being tolerant. One day, you will read what I write, I promise. If I have the chance to choose where I would be born in the next life, I would come to this family and be your family again.

Table of Contents

Prologue

I was born and raised in Tianjin, one of the major municipalities on the East Coast in China. Tested as a "gifted" child with a high IQ score when I was six years old, I attended gifted education programs in both elementary and secondary schools as a science-track student, and then went to a small public university in Beijing majoring in English Language and Literature. As I grew up in a relatively homogenous environment, where most of my classmates look and think similar to me, my geographical perception about China has always been Beijing-centered, and my awareness about regional differences and inequality in China has been limited to media coverages and some conversations with older generations at home. It was not until I went to rural Turkey for a development internship with AIESEC[1] that I got to live for the first time in lower-income communities and to understand how education could look differently across cultures and communities.

The AIESEC internship turned out to be an eye-opening experience to me on several fronts. Firstly, first time working in a school system of which I barely have knowledge, I got to understand difficulties that lie beneath education and schooling.

---

[1] AIESEC was originally an acronym of *Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales*, the organization's full name. This name is no longer in use, however, as now participants come from a variety of college majors, not necessarily from an area related to economic or commercial sciences.

However, with language barriers and difficulties of communication between AIESEC and local schools, the volunteering experience was not as constructive as I had imagined. My peer volunteers shared similar sentiments. Since then, several questions have lingered on in my mind: I was unsure about what teachers and children expected from me or other volunteers. After all, since the volunteers only spent a few weeks at the school, what could such short stays contribute to education there? Moreover, could we "make a difference," as AIESEC claimed? What role(s) do these short term programs play in alleviating the urban-rural inequality in the local school system?

Moreover, as a volunteer in AIESEC, one of the largest international volunteering organizations in the world, I had the opportunity to live in an intern dormitory, where many international volunteers reside during their stay in Ankara area. There, I met and befriended with mostly other European and American international volunteers. As we shared thoughts on volunteering and development, I quickly noticed that my reasons for participating in an international volunteer program were far less clearly defined than those of my Anglo-European peers. I then talked to a few other Chinese interns about this question and found out that their reasons were not clear as well. I wondered, in what ways were Chinese volunteers similar to and different from other interns? Why did they participate in oversea volunteering programs, when they had to pay for transportation and meals themselves?

Besides, I was amazed by the sociality that emerged from a volunteering organization. For instance, after I completed the internship and came back to China, I participated in a few AIESEC social gatherings. I could not understand why AIESECers in the Tsinghua Chapter claimed one another as "best friends" even though they had only

known each other for a few months, or why AIESECers, despite being complete strangers, could quickly appear to be good friends the first time they met, or why although volunteers participated in programs in completely different cultures and industries, AIESECers share a powerful sense of belonging in group meetings and social events. Nor did I understand those games about self-introductions and group tasks and why other AIESECers were so excited about these games. As a result, during those events, I was always the person hiding in the corner, quietly trying to make sense of the surroundings. What were they excited about, and why couldn't I be part of the exuberant crowd?

Yet from the volunteering program and AIESECers, I did get to know more about urban-rural inequality in China. I talked about such experiences in my graduate school application essays in foreign institutions (in the U.S., Canada, and Norway) and pursued graduate degrees in the U.S.. I realized that concepts such as volunteering, service-learning, and community engagement were not foreign to Chinese undergraduate students. I also noticed that a significant number of overseas-educated Chinese students had been participating in or had even founded student organizations for similar development programs in rural China. I was fascinated by Chinese students' comments about China. I heard them discussing, and sometimes joking about how backward, uncivilized, and undemocratic China was; with "foreigners," however, I also heard them talking about how they could not be part of this "fairy land" (or the United States) simply because they were *from China*. It seemed to me that the Chineseness—however they defined it—constituted a central element in overseas-educated Chinese students' narratives about the position they occupied in their cultured worlds.

As a doctoral student studying education and local development, I am curious about these foreign-educated Chinese volunteers in rural schools: what do they teach to those children? Why do they teach what they teach? How do they interact with the rural students, teachers, and schools? How do they see the future of rural children and urban-rural inequality in China? These are questions that my dissertation partially explores. Embarking on this intellectual journey about foreign-educated students' volunteering programs in rural China, I hope to at least document the culture and sociality that emerged from these programs. With a growing number of overseas-educated student returnees taking part in development work in China, I also hope to record the implicit dialogues they foster between Chinese and American educational thought, and their role in the changing Chinese contemporary cultural landscape. Through these aspects, I hope to shed light on the potentials and limitations of global citizenship education, and further directions on refining pedagogy, curriculum, and service-learning programs in China and beyond.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Overseas-Educated Chinese Students in Rural China

"Village chief. Maybe this title could elicit a few imageries in your mind. Alumni graduated from renowned foreign universities. This could also elicit another imagery. However, can you imagine a student who graduated from a renowned foreign university and came back to China to work as a village official? The video I am going to show you next tells you that, yes, the imageries are compatible. Indeed, this could be one person." This is how a TV host introduced Qin Yuefei, a *Touching China* awardee. Run by the state media, *Touching China* is an annual TV show that awards Chinese individuals whose work has impacted and touched the hearts of other Chinese people. Other awardees include influential scientists, astronauts, sport stars, philanthropists, and individuals working in professions such as mailperson or construction worker. In 2017, Qin Yuefei, a Yale College graduate who has just finished his three-year term as a village chief and co-founded Serve for China, an NGO that placed like-minded university graduates to rural villages, was one of the awardee. Following the host's introductory remarks was a video, documenting Qin's work in the village. Qin, facing the camera with a worn-out, dark green jacket, passionately says, "we decide to devote our youths to a cause that we find meaningful." The villagers in the video comments that what sets Qin and other university students apart from the local chiefs is that, "they really want to do something for us, and they fulfill their promises." Then, Qin received his trophy on the

stage. Audiences stood up and applauded as two children handed him a certificate and the trophy.

Qin was not the only one working in the non-profit sector who have "touched the hearts" of Chinese citizens. In the *Touching China* TV show alone, in 2002 to 2016, ten individuals who had participated in public service sectors (*Gongyi huodong*, 公益活动), such as teaching in rural schools or working in rural villages as volunteer teachers, had won this award. In addition, there was also a special award dedicated to Chinese volunteers who had helped rural children's education. It seems that working in rural areas and for rural students has become an increasingly popular activity among Chinese youths, who initiate volunteer programs and found NGOs to place like-minded youths in rural areas for short-term and long-term programs. More recently, overseas-educated Chinese students have increasingly participated in such programs, exerting long-lasting impacts on rural residents and school systems.

This burgeoning public service community is indeed expanding. Focusing on various social issues such as poverty reduction, pollution, labor rights, access to quality education in underserved areas and underserved people, these organizations have formed a nascent civil society in China.[2] Grassroot in nature, these groups operate on limited funding and staff, and mobilize volunteers—mostly university students and young professionals—for their program operation. With an increasing number of Chinese individuals who have studied abroad participating in this new public service sector as full- and/or part-time staff members and volunteers (Spires et al., 2014), models of these

---

[2] See Spires et al. (2014) for a broad picture of NGOs providing social services in China.

organizations and the approaches they take are heavily influenced by such foreign influences.

Education-focused NGOs are particularly so, for two reasons. In terms of the contents and pedagogy, the Chinese people have always been fascinated by foreign ways of education (see Fong, 2011), often claiming that the Western educational approaches are always more "advanced" compared to what is now implemented in China. With an increasing number of Chinese students pursuing undergraduate and advanced degrees abroad, the Chinese people are curious about and eager to learn from their foreign experiences with education that is "advanced and authentic." Moreover, these organizations are also modeled after existing models in Western countries where the tradition of civil associations is more robust. Some organizations directly take their names and organizing principals from other renowned contexts, such as Teach for China as a Chinese variant of Teach for America. In a most recent report on the current status quo of education-related NGOs in China, Song et al. (2017) cites that professionals who founded or are working in smaller NGOs look up to the experiences of Teach for China, such as volunteer training, management, and evaluation, ways to build local partnerships and navigate social relationships, etc. According to an article published in *People's Daily* (Liu and Gu, 2012)*,* the numbers of overseas-educated Chinese students who work for non-profit organizations have grown exponentially. For instance, the number of youths who signed up for the volunteering program with Overseas Chinese Students Children's Fund (OFund) increased from 30 in 2007 to over 1,000 in 2011. A more recent article published by *People' Daily* (Deng, 2018) has highlighted the growing presence and influence of foreign-educated Chinese citizens in the public sphere in China.

My dissertation research is an ethnographic study of a group of such people. In particular, I investigate the educational activities organized by ZY Project, an NGO founded by a group of overseas-educated Chinese students in China. Originally founded in Boston by three then like-minded university students studying in the U.S., ZY Project endeavors to alleviate urban-rural educational inequality through its long- and short-term volunteering programs. I use the case of ZY Project to explore the experience of grassroot organizations operating in China. My research question is: how do foreign-educated Chinese students enact educational development work in rural schools, and how do these programs reflect contemporary Chinese thinking about the meaning of an "educated person"? My specific questions are:

- What is the official curriculum of the development organization?

- What do these youth volunteers teach in rural schools and why?

- What transformations occur in volunteers' self-understanding as they engage in educational volunteering?

- What kinds of social relationships—between the rural, the urban, and the global—emerge from these programs?

- How does the intent to alleviate inequality work in paradoxical or contradictory ways?

This dissertation is divided into nine chapters. Chapter 1 sets the scene for the development work enacted by overseas-educated Chinese students, and details the theoretical framework and previous scholarship that inform the project. I also discuss the significance of this project. In Chapter 2, I elaborate on my debt to related scholars and scholarship, including scholarship on urban-rural educational inequality in China, the

changing patterns of the Chinese self, and literature about global citizenship education as a self-making project. These works are the basis for a critical analysis on the educational work of such NGOs in China. In Chapter 3, I detail my methodological orientation and introduce readers to the organization where I conducted fieldwork. Chapter 4 to Chapter 8 are the main body of the dissertation, analyzing the cosmopolitan ideal that emerges from the educational development work in rural areas, and how this ideal shapes the organization, the volunteers, and the education they enact. Chapter 4 delineates the localization of ZY Project as an organization with a special emphasis on the changes in its curriculum and the diversification of its volunteer body. This chapter serves as the background chapter, on which the stories in the following chapters unfold. Chapter 5 explicates a local term, *jie di qi*, which exemplifies the ideal kind of person who should take part in the program. As this term is constructed and practiced by the volunteers themselves, I show their emphases on malleability of the self and the emerging cosmopolitanism embedded in this term. Chapter 6 takes a closer look at the volunteer experience. Highlighting the hard work that the volunteers engaged in during the summer program, I argue that volunteering is a critical arena through which a new ethical yet elitist self has emerged. Chapter 7 continues the discussion on cosmopolitanism and authentic self, and details the challenges that volunteers encounter in enacting the ideal curriculum. I show how a Chinese theory of learning helps them transcend various dichotomies, such as student-centeredness versus teacher-centeredness and local versus "high cultured" materials. In Chapter 8, I write about different kinds of disillusioned volunteers. Through their disagreements on and critiques about the vision of the ideal kind of person and education to which ZY Project pursues, I show that the Chinese

cosmopolitanism not only represents a new form of social and cultural capital, but also, it is also a form of implicit resistance against the Chinese state's developmentalist governing apparatus. Chapter 9 concludes the dissertation, detailing the empirical, theoretical, and practical implications of the study and its limitations.

Theoretical Framework

An Anthropological Approach to the Self

Anthropologists of education have long held that education is a "cultural process" (Spindler, 1997; Levinson et al., 2000). Attuned to the idea that education centers on the formation of culturally valued personhood in a given context, scholars see education—in formal and non-formal settings—as a process that maintains, transforms, and reproduces culture for its newest members (Cave, 2004; Levinson et al., 2000; Tobin et al., 1989, 2011). Moreover, anthropologists recognize all societies as "providing some kind of training and some set of criteria by which members can be identified as more, or less, knowledgeable" (Levinson et al., 2000, p. 2). In other words, education is distinguished from schooling practices, and includes not only formal educational programs for the young, but also non-formal training schemes, adult education, and the like (see Levinson et al, 2000). Within this broad definition of education, Spindler (1997) further defines the concept of schooling as a calculated intervention in the learning process.

The purpose of education is then closely related to the formation of a cultured self. While many debates exist regarding the meaning of self, and diverge in views of self depending on one's disciplinary frame, this study operates under the premise that self is a culturally patterned way of relating to others, to the material, natural, and spiritual

10

worlds, and to time and space including notions of agency, mind, person, being, and spirit (Hoffman, 1996). The self is a particular way of being and acting endowed with reflexivity and agency (Sokefeld, 1999). As identities are improvised in activity within specific social situations where the self is situated, a person produces objectifications of self-understanding that guide their subsequent behaviors. Hence, behavior is better viewed as a sign of self in practice, not as a sign of self in essence (Holland et al., 1998, p.31). In this sense, any form of education is a powerful arena that shapes individual's culturally particular ways of being, which in turn provide them with resources to respond to the problematic situations where they find themselves.

Here, a few extra sentences of caution are necessary. Understanding human behaviors as self in practice also avoids overemphasizing "identity" as something fixed and cross-culturally relevant, because there *are* world views in which human personhood, human agency, and human collectivity are imagined in terms that do not presuppose the "oneness, continuity, and boundedness of the person, agent, or group" (Handler, 1994). Given the problems associated with the concept of "identity," I choose to focus on the concept "self" rather than "identity" in this project.

Education and the Meaning of the "Educated Person"

Recognizing education as calculated and culturally particular efforts also means that the educators often have an ideal "product" in mind. This is the meaning of the "educated person" that is culturally particular, in relation to the local, regional, national, and international contexts in which the person is embedded. In this section, I briefly

review bodies of literature that critically addresses the production of the "educated person" and its meanings.

Early anthropological works on education have focused on ways in which culture is transmitted in and outside classroom settings. George Spindler and Louise Spindler (1997), as the pioneers of the field of educational anthropology, have documented in detail how schooling is a site that transmits mainstream American culture to the next generation of youths. However, contributors to Spindler's essay collections also point out that for minority groups, transmitting the dominant culture results in the marginalization of minority groups, particularly in the United States.

This body of work, however, devotes insufficient attention to the agency of individual actors. Largely inspired by Marxist theory, researchers began to peep into the "black box" of the cultural transmission process, highlighting how students receive messages in the process of cultural transmission. A representative work is Willis's ethnography on the British "lads" (1977). In his study, Willis demonstrates that students did not passively accept class-based differentiations perpetuated by the school. Rather, they participate in the perpetuation of class division by rebelling to learn, hence, the book title, "learn to labor." Willis thus challenges the one-way reproduction theories inspired by Bourdieu, as well as structuralists such as Louis Althusser. Although critical observers such as Lois Weis (1996, p. xi) characterizes Willis as a "culturalist" that does not adequately address the "nature of knowledge itself, and ways in which knowledge…may be linked to fundamental ways to the located culture which the lads produce," Willis pioneers in complicating the cultural transmission thesis.

Along the same vein, writing about the spread of modern educational practices in the global South, Levinson and Holland (1999) argue that modern schooling serves as a contradictory resource: while it privileges Western ways of knowing and being, it also gives rise to a culturally unique product, that is, the concept of an "educated person." Aiming to move beyond the critical framework from classic studies on cultural reproduction and schooling, authors in Levinson and Holland's collection of essays recognize the importance of local ideologies and traditions, problematizing the Marxist argument that schools were monolithic purveyors of dominant ideologies. To put it in another way, recognizing a culturally specific and relative conception of "educated person" allows room for researchers to appreciate the diverse understandings of education and the historical and cultural particularities of the "products" of education: "the products" informed not only by the modern way of knowing and being, but also, the local responses to it.

The "Educated Person" vis-à-vis the Imagined Future(s)

More recent scholarship on the "educated person" highlights the multiple meanings of "education" assigned by the actors themselves. This body of literature attempts to move beyond the reproduction theory by directly showing how education mediates between the present and the imagined future. If previous scholarship has focused on how the past has shaped the present and the unwitting ways in which people produce and reproduce their own circumstances, this body of literature centers on how the present shapes the future. Taking the future seriously reveals how education mediates between the imagined ideal and the existing conditions in which individual actors are

situated. Therefore, education should be seen as both a cultural transmission process and a process though which people express their hopes and aspirations. Education is "a way of doing or perceiving life, a way of being in the world, and of coming to know it" (Stambach, 2017, p.5). It gives individuals the "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004, 2013) for a different future. Individual actors are able to "shape and enact their social environments in constant dialogue with the way the social environment moves and the way it is predicted to 'act'" (Vigh, 2009, p. 433, as cited in Stambach, 2017, p. 9).

Exploring the linkage between education and the future requires researchers to seriously consider the meaning of the educated person not only in the present, but also in the future. In other words, the educated person also is an *ideal* that could be realized in the future, rather than solely as a *product* that exists in the present. The meanings of the educated person are contingent on the individual intentions and actions to rework on the self in relation to an imagined future, and shape how individuals respond to present social conditions. Following Zigon (2006), who argues that acts of self-fashioning reflect an "ethics of hope," I consider how individuals "better themselves and become the kind of person they want to be" through formal and non-formal ways of education. This is a process of self-fashioning imbricated in the continuous and conscious process of configuring the future; this is also an ethical practice that leads the individual to become a "good" person in one's own cultured world.

Taken together, in this project, I analyze educational programs through an anthropological lens and highlight the work on the self that may occur through the very acts of teaching and learning. Empirically, this analytical framework provides entry into

14

the lived experience of education. Theoretically, it opens up the discussion of education as a form of ethical/moral practice.

Project Significance

This research contributes to existing knowledge about education and development in China. On the empirical level, although ample scholarly literatures have examined the policies and politics of the burgeoning civil associations in relation to the Chinese state (for example, Spires, 2014; Weller, 2004), they have rarely examined the actual programs and their impacts on the ground. With the widening rural-urban educational gap as a result of the Chinese pursuit of *suzhi* and the failing educational reform (c.f., Wu, 2016; Zhao and Deng, 2016), the impacts of these civil associations are critical to the future direction of Chinese education. Such impacts are all the more significant considering the foreign influence brought about by the overseas-educated Chinese students. With these students' increasing involvement in the Chinese education system in and outside the state-education system, understanding their ideals of education and of educated person is also critical amidst the rapid changes of China in a globalizing world.

On the theoretical level, this study builds on the burgeoning literature of the changing model of the Chinese self. The quickly modernizing Chinese society has greatly challenged ordinary people's ways of being, giving rise to the partial individualization of the Chinese self (Kipnis, 2011; Yan, 2010, 2012; Hoffman, 2013; Hansen, 2014; Rofel, 2007; Zhang, 2017) and the consequent decay of the moral landscape (see Yan, 2016; Xu, 2017). The lived experiences of grass-root organizations provide us with a window to ways in which how the younger generation of Chinese youths negotiate the global

values—such as equality, environmentalism, and human rights—that China must engage with (c.f. Kleinman, 2011). Moreover, since my focus is on the education activities with the rural students, unpacking these activities also sheds light on the understanding of the diverse meaning of an "educated person" in contemporary China. In other words, understanding the activities, experiences and impacts of the programs of grass-root NGOs provides insights on the formation of new models of the Chinese self.

Finally, on a practical level, while self-organized voluntary associations in China is relatively new, this form of self-organization is widely popular in Western countries, especially amongst university students in the U.S.. Known as global citizenship education, similar programs are encouraged by universities domestically in China and internationally. These alternative breaks and service-learning programs, internships, and research trips aim at cultivating student's civic mindedness on a global scale. As many of these voluntary associations are taken from and following the suit of the U.S. model, this study helps global educators understand how the grass-root civil activities are re-contextualized in another culture. It thus provides global educators with critical insights on ways to design more culturally relevant programs to cultivate future "global citizens" and to "do good."

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

In this chapter, I elaborate on the background of my study, as well as the relevant scholarly literatures. In particular, I first explicate the rural-urban divide in the Chinese educational system. Then I turn to existing research on volunteerism and global citizenship, paying particular attention to studies on volunteerism in China. Lastly, I review anthropological studies on the changing models of the contemporary Chinese self. At the broader level, I draw from post-structural critiques of volunteerism and read volunteering as an arena that shapes the formation of the self. Below I elaborate on the scholarly discussions that lay foundation for my research and ways in which my study contributes to these scholarly discussions.

The Rural-Urban Divide in China and the Bifurcated Education System

The world has witnessed enormous changes in China and its education system in the last century. Once an empire in the early 1900s, China has successfully transformed itself to a modern nation and a global power. After the overthrow of the Qing dynastic rule and the triumph in the hard-fought wars against Western and Japanese colonial powers in the first half of the 20th century, the Chinese Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. The China back then suffered from hunger, poverty, ill-health, and illiteracy. With the Communist rule in the 1950s to the 1970s, China has

also suffered from the Cultural Revolution, one of the deadliest political movements in history. Eventually, after a ten-year isolation from the outside world during the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping, the *de facto* chief leader of the Communist Party, advocated for and implemented fundamental economic reforms in the late 1970s, known as the Reform and Opening Up Policy (*gaige kaifang*). He argued that China needed to open its doors and learn from Western countries. These reforms led to a massive scale of economic development and urbanization, which saw the emergence of migrant population across various urban and rural regions, changing patterns of land development, and the reconfiguration of property and personhood (Liu, 2002; Friedmann, 2005; Saxenian, 2006; Yan, 2003, 2009; Zhang and Ong, 2008).

China's economic take-off on the global arena, however, has led to deep divisions within the country. Avid watchers of China have characterized the nation as simultaneously a First World player and a quintessential Third World laborer (Dehart, 2012, p. 1371). This is particularly so when it comes to the various kind of deep divides in the country, especially the urban and rural divide in the schooling system. In this section, I write about the current status quo of the educational urban-rural divide in China. This serves as the context against which educational NGOs - and its volunteers - are working for "changes" and "doing good."

Education in Urban and Rural Areas in Retrospect

Traditionally, in China, the difference between the city and countryside does not lie in their differentiated degrees of economic (and cultural) development. Reviewing the long and complicated history of the concept "city" in Chinese history is beyond the scope

of this chapter; however, suffice to say that, in the traditional Chinese cosmology, the Chinese city is not the prime unit of economic and cultural interactions and there was little effort to construct the city as an "eternal" entity (Wright, 1977). The literati wrote about different ideals of the concept of "city" in relation to the Confucian and/or Taoist ideals, and the later development of this concept from the Han Dynasty (202 BCE to 220 CE) onward was very much related to the ritualist-symbolic acts of the emperor. Early urbanization of the countryside did not result in a distinction between the rural and the urban, but a "regional system" in which places are classified according to their level of centrality in particular functional hierarchies (Skinner, 1977, p. 258-259). It was only after Mao's Communist Revolution when he advocated for the militarist strategy of "encircling the city through establishing rural base" and the subsequent market reforms in the Deng era that the regional "system" was transformed to an urban-rural dichotomy.

Similarly, education systems in the urban and the rural areas were characterized as an "undifferentiated unity" (Rao and Ye, 2016). Aimed at training governmental officials, all schools in urban and rural areas in imperial China were devoted to the teaching and learning of Confucian classics to screen talents and educate the public. The ultimate goal is to maintain the rule of hereditary monarchies. This educational-social system is known as the "gentry system" (Fei, 1992). However, this system failed to respond to the demands of modernization, which challenged and eventually crashed the imperial power in the late 19th century. As a consequence, largely resulting from the West-dominated globalization and the expansion of the modern schooling system, the Chinese education system underwent drastic transformation in the first half of the 20th century. Previously, schools were financed by the local communities themselves with the

aim of educating the community and winning official ranks that would bring status and reputation to the family-lineage community (Zheng, 1992; Faure, 2007). However, as the newly-introduced modern primary schools were largely seen as a will of the central government for the development of the nation's competitiveness, these schools did not attract financial support from the local community. With the economic depression in China at the time, it was all the more difficult to establish primary schools in rural areas. The rural-urban dichotomy therefore gradually came into shape.

The emergence of China's modern educational system in the 20th century was marked by a sharp dichotomy between schooling for urban and rural residents (see Rao and Ye, 2015 for a review). With the rise of cities as cultural and social centers in the early 20th century, a distinction between urban and rural lives gradually started to emerge. Yet at the same time, reformist intellectuals and educators such as James Yen, Tao Xingzhi, and Liang Shuming began to reconceptualize schools for the rural environment as spaces for the reconstruction of rural societies (Merkel-Hess, 2016). However, their efforts were disrupted by China's half century of war and revolution in the 20th century.

At the time of the Communist takeover in 1949, 80% of the adults in the rural areas were illiterate. Moreover, With the revolution's dual goals of national modernization and opportunity redistribution in favor of the "people," i.e., the masses of workers and peasants, the Ministry of Education faced the pressure of satisfying two demands: to produce a group of highly trained techno-experts and to provide greatly broadened mass education. From the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, the state promoted two separate schemes in rural and urban areas respectively: a rural half-farming/half-study program and a 10-year urban experimental curriculum (Unger, 1980; Ross, 2006). However, such

reform inevitably failed because of the ultimate power of the university selection examinations. Moreover, despite the dramatic expansion of basic part-time and full-time education schemes during the times of Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1958-1976), many school-age children were unable to attend school and new literates lapsed into illiteracy (cite Lou, 2010). It was not until 1956 that the state's attention seriously turned towards the peasants: a national conference reviewed that primary school attendance rate in cities was as high as 98%, but in rural areas, it was probably below 70% (Price, 1979, p. 213).

China's current urban-rural division was formally institutionalized with the Party's establishment of the household registration (*hukou*) system (Wang, 2004, 2005). The state officially restricted rural-to-urban migration in order to secure better resource concentration for urban area's economic development. Rural residents suffered from a combination of lack of qualified teachers and economic resources, closures of secondary schools and colleges, narrowly ideological pedagogy and teaching materials, decrease of academic standards, and severe disruptions of attendance and the school calendar (Thorgerson, 1990; Seeberg, 1990). Seeberg (1990) found very little improvement in adult and school age literacy rates in this period, and the literacy rates among school-aged youth dropped from 74.9% to 60.6%.

After ten turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, by the end of 1977, the Chinese state decided to integrate itself into the global system and implemented the Reform and Opening Up policy. This marked the beginning of contemporary China's pursuit of modern development. In terms of education, regular full-time education was affirmed and the National College Entrance Examination was reinstalled. Moreover, the

21

"key-point" school system was revived in the interests of ensuring schooling quality.

These key-point schools were mostly concentrated in cities, townships, and counties.

Influenced by the "Four Modernizations" strategy,[3] youth perception of the countryside

and peasant life also changed. Urban-educated youth no longer had an interest in rural

life as its values and the "moral high ground" on which it rested during the revolution

period (Yan, 2008) had lost their appeal. Moreover, despite the state effort in

universalizing basic education, resulting in a 99.7% net enrollment rate for school-aged

children and 93.7% for high school enrollment, the 2016 census data revealed that among

the 4.88% illiterate population, 87.5% are rural residents (Ministry of Statistics, 2018).

Existing research on rural education in China reveal that rural schools suffer from teacher

shortages, poor teaching quality, lack of teaching facilities and community support, and

high dropout rates (Hannum, 2003; Lou, 2011; Wu, 2016). Urban-rural inequality in

secondary education is the key location of educational stratification (Li, 2015) and there

is significant urban-rural gap in college access (Qiao, 2010).

The Invention of the Suzhi (Human Quality) Discourse: The Rural as the Internal Other

The bifurcation of state education system is all the more marked by the Chinese

pursuit of *suzhi* (素质), literally translated as "human quality." First appeared on par with

the idea of population quality (*renkou suzhi,* 人口素质) in 1976, the *suzhi* discourse

---

[3] The "Four Modernizations" were first proposed by Mao and later enacted by Deng after the Cultural Revolution. The "Four Modernizations" refer to, respectively, the modernizations of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology in China.

emerged in relation to the Chinese government's plan for state modernization: the state documents investigating rural poverty attributed China's failure to modernize to the low *suzhi* of the population, especially in the rural area. Since then, this discourse has gained discursive power among Chinese citizens and also created the category of the "rural people," who are seen as backward and not modern. Individuals with rural backgrounds, such as the rural students, the migrant workers in urban areas, and the peasants, are qualitatively seen as inferior and as the internal Other (see Anagnouts, 2004).[4]

Among the body of literature that addresses the significance of *suzhi* in contemporary Chinese society, most have treated the concept as a governing technique that forces Chinese subjects to internalize the "ideal values" and to be better governed and self-governed. Drawing from the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, anthropologists (Anagnost, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2009; Sigley, 2009; Yan, 2003, 2008) articulate the creative power of *suzhi* discourse: it produces subject positions for capitalist accumulation. In so doing, this discourse legitimizes the state's modernization agenda and penetrates into intimate spheres of life, such as reproduction and childrearing (Murphy, 2004; Tobin et al., 2009). To put it another way, this body of literature argues that *suzhi* produces identities that cause social agents to accept various developmental interventions, to interpret the difficulties that they encounter as indicative of the need for self-improvement, and to regulate their everyday conduct in ways that conform to the common political drift of society. The governance of population creates the kind of global

---

[4] Such a distinction parallels the West vs. non-West distinction critiqued by Dipesh Chakrabarty, who argues that such a distinction, promoted by the West, in effect has put the non-West into a "waiting room of history" (Chakrabarty, 2000). Also see G. W. Skinner's chapter in Skinner (1977) for a detailed discussion on the difference between "peasant" and "farmer" in modern Chinese history.

persons that are aligned with the Party-State governing ideology in contemporary China, and is also central to the rise of global China (Greenhalgh, 2009). The language of *suzhi* has become the politically correct language of social snobbery.

However, such an understanding of *sushi* has received criticism for its lack of empirical evidence and its negligence on elements of Chinese governance that are culturally relevant rather than simply neo-liberal (Kipnis, 2007, 2008; Nonini, 2008). Meanwhile, Kipnis (2007, 2011) argues that *suzhi* should not be reduced to an expression of Western neoliberal governmentality: researchers need to further contextualize the discourse in the Marxist/Confucian traditions of thought to tease out the cultural particularity of the modes of governance in China. Tracing the legacies of imperial governing in contemporary Chinese education system, Kipnis (2011) identifies four elements in the Chinese governing complex: exemplarity, examinations, holistic hierarchy, and nation-building. He further argues that Chinese nationalism is a crucial context to understand the holistic hierarchy enacted through *suzhi* discourse: the *suzhi* discourse is created and constantly evoked by the Chinese government and citizens alike to collectively cultivate the welfare of the Chinese nation (rather than only the Communist Party-State).

Suzhi Education in Rural Areas: Modernizing the Internal Other

The realm of education--both formal and non-formal--is where the *suzhi* discourse gets to be officially enacted and implemented. In response to sharp criticism on the exam-oriented education model and the demand for a knowledge economy, the government started to promote a model of *suzhi jiaoyu* (素质教育, best translated as "education for

human quality") (see Dello-Iacovo, 2009). This reform is all-encompassing: curriculum materials, teaching methods, teaching materials and assessment systems were to be adapted to the new model, in which an interdisciplinary, comprehensive quality-oriented and student-centered education would replace the subject-centered, knowledge- and fact-centered, and teacher-centered curriculum. The Guideline of Curriculum Reform of Basic Education in 2001 proclaims that education should and will "be oriented towards modernization, the world, and the future" in the context of global competition (Website of Chinese Government, 2001). One of the directors of this endeavor, explains that the curriculum reform aims at three aspects of transformation: from centralization to decentralization in curriculum policy-making, from scientific rationality to social constructivism in curriculum paradigm, and from knowledge transmission to inquiry-based mode of teaching (Zhong, 2006, as cited in Wu and Han, 2010). Since then, education in China has been supposed to cultivate creative and independent thinking skills, integrated practical skills, teamwork, and cooperation (see Hansen, 2013; Tobin et al., 2009; Woronov, 2003).

The implementation of the *suzhi* model is not without problems, especially in rural China and on students and families with rural backgrounds. In urban schools, scholars have reported insufficient finance and inadequate support structures with the new curriculum materials (Dello-Iacovo, 2009). In rural China, the *suzhi* education model brought new problems rather than solving the previous ones. Rural children's commitment to memorization makes it difficult for them to gain much from initiatives that aim at reducing the importance of long study hours (Kipnis, 2001). The new *suzhi* curriculum materials, including texts and activities, are urban-centered (Lou, 2011). This

partially contributes to the loss of faith by many rural students and migrant youths in the efficacy of schooling (Lou, 2011; Li, 2015; Wu, 2016). Similarly, the *suzhi jiaoyu* program in a suburban school for migrant children demarcates the lines between the migrant, the urban and the rural, and only serves as a "showcase" for the benefit of visitors (Lin, 2011; Li, 2015).

Despite these problems, youths and parents themselves have practiced the discourse in education. Middle-class parents living in urban areas send their children to expensive personal skill and lifestyle training courses in the name of cultivating their *suzhi* (Zhang, 2010; Dello-Iacovo, 2009); teachers supplement teaching materials about countries other than China to "raise quality of the children" (Woronov, 2008); migrant children themselves identify the poor quality of their education when comparing their low *suzhi* with urban counterparts (Fong, 2007b). In sum, the contemporary Chinese cultural landscape is marked by a deepening urban-rural divide and education has become a key arena where people invest in for better positions in the social hierarchy. It is against this contemporary Chinese social landscape that I investigate the cultural encounters between oversea-educated Chinese youths and rural schools in China.

Tackling the Rural-Urban Gap: Education for Rural Development in China

In response to the widening urban-rural gap, as well as Chinese people's increasing exposure to values such as equality and social justice, a burgeoning civil society has emerged in contemporary China. In turn, this phenomenon has caught much scholarly attention. In this section, I delineate the origin of voluntary associations in modern China and review the literature that highlights the Party-State's influence in the mobilization of

Chinese youths for rural education. As the stated goal of such efforts is rural development, I draw from anthropological literatures on global development, and highlight the work on the self on the part of the participants.

Civil Societies in China

Influences from the State

The term volunteering, or *zhiyuan huodong* (志愿活动, literally translated as activities that accomplish the aspirations and hopes of the participants) has been used in public discussions since the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949. As early as in the 1950s in the Korean War, Chinese government deployed its People's Volunteer Army to fight against the American troops. At that time, the word "volunteer" was employed because Chinese government was unwilling to "official declare a war against the United States." It is said that Chinese youths "voluntarily signed up to be a part of the army" in order to guard the border between China and North Korea. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, about 17 million youths were sent from urban areas to the countryside in the "Up to Mountains and Down to the Countryside" (*shangshan xiaxiang*) Movement, taking part in farming activities. Although this was a policy initiative in the Mao era, youths participated into this development and migration movement partly due to their willingness to serve the country and alleviate the undesired living status in the countryside.[5] In the contemporary era, in the vows to join the Young Pioneers of China, the Communist Youth League, or the Communist Party, the term *zhiyuan* is employed.

---

[5] Older generations of my family members, despite feeling regret for what they now think as "irrational decisions," still talk about their experiences in the countryside with rich and complex emotions.

The early use of the word *zhiyuan* or voluntary was not really completely voluntary due to its association with state-geared activities.

Recognizing the lack of educational resources in rural areas, since the mid-1990s, the Communist Youth League Central Committee and the China Youth Development Foundation have organized the first wave of large scale teaching-focused volunteering programs. Since then, millions of university students have signed up for short- and long-term volunteer positions in schools in underdeveloped areas in China (see He, 2006; Zhang and Lin, 2008; Song et al., 2017).

Official promotion of the "volunteering spirit" was sparked by a national tragedy. In 2008, the Sichuan earthquake struck Wenchuan, Sichuan Province, China, leading to more than 69,000 deaths, over 370,000 injuries and about 20,000 lives missing. That marks the "Year Zero" of contemporary Chinese philanthropy and volunteering (see Shieh and Deng, 2011; Xu[6], 2017). Chinese citizens then began to self-organize and founded non-governmental organizations to provide social services to underdeveloped areas and underserved people. The tragedy has sparked national discussions about grassroots organizing not only for disaster relief, but also in sectors such as education, poverty reduction, and ethnic culture preservation (see Shieh and Deng, 2011). Since then, *zhiyuan fuwu* (志愿服务, literally translated as volunteer service) has become one of the most popular activities that Chinese youths engage in. With the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, for which the state mobilized thousands of university students to work

[6] The "year zero" is what Niu Huang, a key informant, told me when discussing the NGO sector in China. Xu (2017) provides a thorough, on-the-ground account of the volunteers and civic associations in Sichuan. He argues that the compassion of volunteering is both enabled and constrained by the political context and that Chinese citizens are facing a moral-political dilemma in contemporary China.

as volunteers, the spirit of volunteering is literately part and parcel of the lives of contemporary Chinese youths.

Forming voluntary associations in the public sphere becomes popular for Chinese youths. Operating outside the Party realm, some of the organizations grew out from university student organizations, while some others were founded by civic-minded Chinese citizens passionate about bringing changes to the undesirable status quo of rural schooling in China (He, 2006). These people include philanthropists, university professors, and recent university graduates who participated in volunteering teaching activities before (see Huang, 2013). Notable organizations include Teach for China (modeled after Teach for America), EV Youth Organization, and Beijing Western Sunshine Rural Development Foundation. According to the latest report on education-related NGOs (Song et al., 2017), the field has undergone several changes since the 1990s: from individual level to the institutional level, from providing material support to offering professional teaching activities, from serving underdeveloped areas to helping disadvantaged students in urban areas, and from providing substituting elements to offering supplementary activities. In sum, education-focused NGOs have given rise to a burgeoning civil society that is increasingly and continuously diversifying. Although the approaches taken by NGOs vary, on a societal level, these NGOs hope to alleviate the urban-rural inequalities entrenched in the state's bifurcated education system.

Scholars are cautious about the prospect of full-fledged development of such a civil society in China, because any success of grassroot initiatives might lead to a "public indictment of the failed party-state and its local bureaucracy" (Huang, 2013, p. 501). At the same time, the government-NGO relationship has been described as contingent

symbiosis (Spires, 2011): it is fragile yet mutually beneficial. NGOs with less "radical" agendas, including those working in the area of education, tend to benefit from individual and institutional support, such as those from volunteers, companies, and private foundations (Spires et al., 2014). Post-modern scholarship (Hoffman, 2013) also suggests that large-scale mobilization of volunteer labor constitutes the state's new governing technique that helps it shun from welfare provision.

Voluntary associations and their impacts on rural education in China

On a micro-level, to date, scholars working on education-focused NGOs have documented the impacts and challenges that these organizations encounter in their works. Volunteers have relieved the pressure from teacher shortages (Li, 2008), brought new educational concepts and teaching methods to rural schools (Shao, 2008; Zhen, 2008), while students in poverty-stricken areas have enjoyed dedicated teachers in classes (Tao Xingzhi Research Association, 2008). The volunteers and students have also forged deep emotional connections (Li, 2008; Tao Xingzhi Research Association, 2008; Song et al., 2017). During the course of my fieldwork, local teachers have also repeatedly emphasized ways in which volunteers have "livened up the dull and boring lives of rural students." Yet, misunderstandings and conflicts between the volunteers and the local people also exist (Xiang and Yun, 2009; Zhou and Shang, 2011). The volunteers also faced challenges of insufficient teaching skills and supervisions (Zhou and Shang, 2011). Writing from the vintage point of university administrations, scholars have pointed out that volunteering opportunities are not open to all university students (Li, 2008). Physical hardship and limited knowledge about post-service employment prospects deterred

college students from volunteering (Li, 2008; Wang et al., 2008; Zhen, 2008). Largely written by Chinese scholars, this line of research points to the potentials and prospects that education-focused initiatives could offer to students in underdeveloped areas.

At the same time, such a large-scale mobilization of youths from the urban to the rural could also be read from a macro social movement perspective (Zhang and Lin, 2008). University youths have become a group that voices their disagreement and dissatisfactions with the current status quo of the Chinese society (Rolandsen, 2008; Lin and Sun, 2010).

Development and Self-Making: A Global Perspective

Here, it is necessary to review literatures on youths engaging in similar development projects to foster change. An increasingly popular similar model that has also been considered by Chinese youths and educators is the service-learning and alternative break programs that are crystalized under the name of global citizenship education (see Goren and Yemini, 2017 for a review). Relevant here is also the rise of volunteerism among Western youths. In what follows, I briefly review previous studies that consider ways in which development work shapes the self of the aid worker themselves. As I show below, the development work–or working with the Others–is a powerful arena that shapes the way in which participants position themselves on the globe. It also shapes the participant's model of the self.

Volunteering and becoming a global citizen

Currently a popular concept in Western educational institutions, the concept of global citizenship is closely related to globalization as a modern human condition. In order to prepare students to navigate and thrive in modern global society, many countries have begun adding curriculum contents aimed at developing a global orientation among students (see Yemini, 2017).

Moreover, short- and long-term international trips have been increasingly popular. Students are encouraged to sign up for such trips and to work with the Others for two reasons. First, through such trips, students hope to develop an inventory of modern skills, such as intercultural competency, cross-cultural communication skills, advocacy and campaigning, and leadership skills (Adams and Carfagna, 2006). Universities and GC educators hope to equip students with skills that help them successfully navigate the increasingly global workforce. More importantly, such trips, as a non-formal way of education, also shoulder a civic function: liberal-minded educators and students see working with the global Others as an opportunity to tackle the most urgent issues of humankind. Often related to global development, these issues include poverty, environmental destruction, discrimination, and violence. By working "on behalf of humanities everywhere" (Adam and Cafagna, 2006, p. 123), volunteers become future leaders and agents of change in the global community. Liberal-minded global educators thus interpret such engagement with the Others as a form of progressive social action on a global scale.

Volunteering as a self-making project

However, interpreting volunteering as progressive social actions–and the concept of global citizenship itself–have been under critical scrutiny. Following works from anthropology of development that highlight the North-South power imbalances and the positionalities of actors involved in the global development initiatives (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001, 2012; Mosse, etc.), a major body of research have raised concerns on the value-free positions of GCE initiatives, and argue that GCE programs are largely self-serving. Critical analyses on existing GCE programs (including those by non-formal adult participants) show that the desire for participation of the Northern American global citizens stemmed from a dominant white, middle class sense of entitlement and obligation to intervene on a global scale (Heron, 2007). These global experiences constitute a new form of symbolic capital for Northern participants (Snee, 2014). On the contrary, community partners report that volunteers' impacts on the local community are minimal and usually very temporary and the impacts were of little concern on the part of the GC participants (Cocoratan and Handler, 2013; Holdesworth and Quinn, 2011; Jewath, 2006). Larson's collection of essays (2016) also identified various kind of challenges that burden the local hosting communities for the GCE programs: administrators report economic costs on the part of the host families and NGO partners, while struggling to makes sense of the othering and sometimes colonialist stereotypes the GC participants projected onto the local communities. Hence, although imagined as progressive social action, voluntary labor as charitable, humanitarian, or development practice may reinforce inequality between givers and recipients (Mittermaier, 2014). Together, this body of literature follows post-structural theorization on global

33

development, and highlights the self-serving nature of these initiatives and the limitations on the scale of changes that GCE (and global development) initiatives could bring about.

An overlooked implication of the post-structural critiques is how such initiatives shape the self of the volunteer participants. In other words, close interactions with people who are perceived as Others could reinforce existing patterns of the self or give rise to new kinds of self in local and global contexts. To this point, more recent anthropological literatures on volunteerism and the "aidland" have much to contribute. Treating the diverse and complex life experiences of development professionals and volunteers as an object of inquiry, more recent research carves out a critical space where one could gain new understandings about why development is deployed in the way it is (Fechter and Hindman, 2011; Fechter, 2011). In other words, despite running the risk of creating a reified, even dated picture of global development and diverting attentions away from development outcomes (Harrison, 2013), understanding the lives of development professionals is fruitful in investigating the "*conditions* in which altruism takes place" (p.37, emphasis in original).

Along this vein, the experiential dimension of volunteer programs becomes critical. Listening to the interpretations from privileged youths themselves, critical scholars argue that GCE programs serve as a rite-of-passage to adulthood (Hickel, 2013; Swan, 2012). That is, the liminal space constructed in encountering real differences and authentic global Others form the ideal self for the youths in their home cultures. Unsurprisingly, the pattern of the self resembles that of a white, middle-class, individualist "normal American" (Jethwa, 2006; Cocoratan and Handler, 2013; Lukka and Ellis, 2001). Nonetheless, youths have also become more self-reflexive in that they

develop embedded and symbolic connections with local communities that recast their difficult life experiences as valuable and significant (Holdsworth and Quinn, 2011).

Moving beyond the North-South binary oppositions, Smith et al. (2013) details the role of global Christianity in the liminal space of volunteering, highlighting that the shared cosmopolitanism that grew out from these programs are rooted in the participants' historically specific experiences of their religiosity. Similarly, Mittermaler's (2014) informants explain their "help" as a duty to God. Mangold (2012) argues that transnational spaces open up new possibilities for transnational selves.

Taking the experiences of volunteering seriously and relating them to the global North-South power imbalances, then, highlight the moral implications of these programs in relation to the "global moral economy of compassion" (Mittermaler, 2014, p. 518). To put it simply, it constructs new forms of subjectivities as well as highly moralized forms of both national and global citizenship. It is a site of productivity and potentiality that creates not only work-ready active, compassionate citizens, but also new sources of value and profit. On a global scale, the encounters between privileges and poverty have given rise to an "affective economy" that celebrates the harnessing of people's compassion for others as a form of public utility and caring citizenship (Adams, 2012; Hardt, 1999; Muehlebach, 2012). Thus, "doing good" is also political in that it carries assumptions about a larger cause - the collective goal or the global public good.

Together, existing research show complex power dynamics between the helpers and the helped in volunteer programs. They also point to ways to move beyond the dichotomous heroic vs. cynical representations of the helpers, thus, carving out spaces to decolonize GCE initiatives. Echoing the recent call in the anthropology of morality that

focuses on the individual understandings of the good and the just, this study build on

structural critiques on GCE initiates and attempt to understand the experiences of "doing

good" among Chinese youths.

The Changing Models of the Chinese Self and Its Moral Implications

As stated, self-organizing initiatives are political in nature. Their activities have

direct implications on the participants' new formations of their moral / ethical self[7] as

well as their understandings on the politics of public welfare provision. In the case of

China, this is particularly complicated, as the models of the Chinese self have undergone

rapid changes resulting from the state's ambition for a global economic and cultural

leadership role. Traditionally embedded in the Confucian *wulun* (五伦, five kinds of

relationships) including father-son, ruler-subject, husband-wife, elder-younger, and

friend-friend, the Chinese self has experienced a quickly individualizing trend in

contemporary society. No longer primarily relational beings that cannot exist without the

participation of others and the immediate communities such as family and kin (Tu, 1984),

the traditional concentric model of the Chinese relational self has been greatly affected by

new modes of governance, new patterns of organizing social life, and the Chinese state's

new and changing position in the global arena. Therefore, the concentric circle model and

its ensuing socialites are affected.

---

[7] Here, it is important to note that I do not place much emphasis on the difference between "morality" and "ethics." Although anthropologists have argued that morality hinges more on the structure of the culture, hence, is more unreflexive, while ethics on the agency and is more reflexive (Zigon, 2008; Lambek, 2010), in the Chinese context, morality (*dao de*) is a broader category that can refer to both moral codes and dispositions, and is used in both official discourse and everyday conversations (see Xu, 2017; Yan, 2014).

To begin with, with the Chinese state's massive drive for modernization, "individual" has become a key unit in both discourse and action in the everyday life of Chinese people. Coping with the changing economy, the Chinese people have become more and more enterprising, characterized by their calculating, practical, and self-disciplinary behaviors (Yan, 2010). Ong's (1999) early investigation of transnational Chinese entrepreneurs shows that Chinese citizens "evade, deflect, and take advantage of political and economic conditions in different parts of the world" (p. 113) for their personal capital accumulation. These "flexible" citizens were able to appropriate Western values (such as democracy) and humanist practices (such as philanthropy) to this end. These middle-class Chinese citizens exhibit the individualistic ethos that is later found in the contemporary Chinese landscape.

The pursuit of personal wealth has given rise to a new Chinese middle-class that is characterized by its consumption patterns (see Fleischer, 2007; Zhang, 2010). Despite a "dizzying and ever-shifting array of lifestyles and identities" in Chinese megacities (Pieke, 2014), the individualistic new middle-class are desiring and choosing (Hoffman, 2013; Rofel, 2007; Kim et al., 2016). In turn, they practice new forms of lifestyle practices and forms of consumption. For instance, high-end luxury products, as well as home and automobile ownership have become the defining identity marker of the new middle class (Osburg, 2013; Tomba, 2009; Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2017). Chinese citizens, especially urban youths, operate through "sexual, material, and affective self-interests," eager to demonstrate choices and responsibilities as key aspects of their identity. In other words, no longer are urban youths embedded solely in the five dimensions in the

concentric circle model; they actively seek to re-embed themselves in imagined national and global collectives.

Emerging from this project of re-imagination, however, is a deep structural tension between the old and the new. Liu (2000) documents the "arbitrary combination of cultural forms" (p. 183) in everyday cultural lives in China, while scholars of the "individualization" thesis have cautioned observers of China that Chinese society is still a mixture of "premodern, modern, and postmodern" conditions (for example, Yan, 2010). Such conditions are exemplified in the transnational entrepreneurs' tight gift-giving social ties maintained through kinship relationships in contemporary China (Patterson, 2006). Bringing this argument further, Kleinman (2011) characterizes the new sociality as something "atomized" (p. 20-21). Chinese individuals are getting used to interacting with individuals who are not related to one another by any particular ties. In many cases, the new sociality will eventually turn a stranger into an acquaintance or will form a new group membership, such as online dating or NGO work (Rolandsen, 2008); in other cases it remains a temporary connection among unrelated individuals. In Kleinman's view, this atomized status quo gives rise to a "divided self," where individuals experience dilemmas on and about their own lifeworld, which are now expanded to the global collective. Kleinman (2011) further contends that this particular tension has transformative and moral potential: personhood in China are now including a deeper sensibility about environment protection, social welfare, volunteering, and calling for the state to be active on issues concerning social justice.

Hence, carefully reading the changing models of the Chinese self in the global arena highlights the importance of new social groups outside of the traditional *wulun*

relationship. As the self-initiated voluntary associations construct such a relationship, ways in which they shape contemporary Chinese selfhood remains to be seen.

The Chinese Self vis-a-vis the Internal and External Others

Existing inquiries on Chinese youths have found their self-centered and materialistic outlooks in relation to the singleton generation phenomenon (Fong, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2009; Rosen, 2009; Tobin et al., 1989, 2011) and their collective and individual struggles to find positions in China and the world (for example, Bregnbaek, 2016; Rosen, 2009). These studies point to the importance of the state and the West in Chinese youths' value-orientations.

To begin with, urban Chinese youths are well aware of China's domestic and foreign affair crises and often refer the nation as a "backward" nation. In a study on the value orientation of Chinese college-educated youths, Wang (2006) reveals a "collective inferiority complex and resulting dislocation of cultural identities" (p. 233) among Chinese youths. This results in a national nihilism and a magnified, empty patriotism. Other scholars (Fong, 2004; Hoffman, 2010; Hansen, 2013; Hail, 2015) have observed similar phenomena, and explained the empty patriotism though youth beliefs that "they could no more cease to be people of China than they could cease to be their parents' children" (P. 645). This is an "imagined cosmopolitanism" (Schein, 1994, p. 156), exerting powerful influences on the ways that youths assert their presences as cultural beings and producers.

However, more recent study has pointed to importance of the internal Other in the construction of Chinese youths' self. In visiting the countryside, urban youths were able

to interact with people of different socio-economic backgrounds than their own, resulting in a new collective consciousness about the undesirable schooling status quo of their internal Others (Geng, 2008; Fleischer, 2011; Hoffman, 2013). Such experiences resulted in an "improved self" that is closely related to the state's *suzhi* discourse.

More interestingly, engaging with the internal Other also allow the urban youths to dodge the Party's influence on modern Chinese citizens' self-construction. In Rolandsen's (2008) account of an urban volunteering program, the urban youths were able to formed a collectivity outside kinship and to "realize one's potential as organizer or leader" and "an opportunity to spend one's spare time in a meaningful way" (p. 119). Another investigation on the motivations and aspirations of Chinese urban volunteers, Fleitscher (2011) documents the coexistence of the *suzhi* discourse, the distrust on Party leadership and the concern about China's moral decadence among the Chinese youth. Reproducing and challenging state discourses, the urban youths became both objects and agents of the state's governmentality. Taking this line of research further, the internal Other also constitute the youths' quest for authentic personhood in the Chinese society (Sum, 2017). This body of literature points to the equally significant role of the internal Other - the disadvantaged and the marginalized—in the construction of the contemporary Chinese self.

In sum, in my investigation of the educational practices of self-organized volunteer associations in China, I draw from post-structural critiques of volunteerism and read volunteering as an arena that shapes the formation of the self. I also contextualize the formation process in the changing patterns of the Chinese self. Moreover, I pay particular attention to the discursive power of "human quality," and see what role the internal and

external Others play in the formation of middle-class Chinese ethical self. In doing so, I

attempt to highlight the ethical impacts that the Chinese volunteers could bring to

contemporary Chinese society.

Chapter 3: Peering into *Zhiyou Jihua*: Methodology, Methods, and Ethical Concerns

Ethnography is the guiding methodology in this project. As concepts of self are an arena enacted through actions, they are better approached through holistic documentations of actions *in situ*. In this regard, ethnography is an appropriate way to answer my research questions, because this methodology "describes how a cultural group works and exports the beliefs, language, behaviors, and issues such as power, resistance, and dominance" (Creswell, 2007, p. 70). Adopting an ethnographic approach helps me to holistically address the "how," "what," "when," and "why" questions about the particular group(s) of people that I study.

People-Centered Ethnography

Plenty of educational researchers approach the phenomenon of education and schooling "qualitatively." As much as I appreciate these researchers' attempts to stay away from scientism and empiricism, I do not see "qualitative" studies entirely the same with ethnographic studies. Nor do I see much observation or interview ethnographic. This is because the ethnographic approach places the notion of "culture" at the center of the research process. In this context, culture is not simply understood as a list of

characteristics or traits of a given a group of people. Rather, I recognize the postmodern nature of culture in that it is a fluid entity shaping and shaped by the actors located within it through time as well. Culture is related to, but not entirely hinges upon group identifications as defined by sociological boundaries. This is particularly important for my study, because the cultures of my target groups (Chinese students studying in Western countries, and rural students aspiring for urban and global culture) have been "fused" due to the compressions of time and space that are characteristic of contemporary globalization (see Appadurai, 1996). At the same time, I recognize the historical rootedness of culture. Realizing the risks of reifying and essentializing culture into objects, I understand cultured artifacts, such as food, symbols, clothes, etc., as products that embody certain aspects of culture. As such, I approach "culture" from the perspective of symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who argues that culture is public at its core, in that it is constituted by humans in practice and interaction.

I choose to use people-centered ethnography as the guiding methodology for this study also because of the inherent holism it affords me. That is, ethnographic encounters allow me to access both the emic and the etic perspectives of my informants. Accessing the two perspectives allows me to restore (the emic) and reconstruct (the etic) the volunteering phenomenon at the same time. The emic perspective refers to the knowledge system my informants constructs. This system is not always evident to the locals' eyes, because they often take it for granted in everyday settings. At the same time, my "intrusions" to the locals' world reveals an etic perspective, the interpretations based on

an outsider's mind. Taking the emic and the etic together, I document a holistic account about volunteering and service-learning from the perspectives of the volunteers and the local students.

Accessing "other's" epistemology is usually not an easy task. This is why conducting an ethnographic project requires the researcher to be long-embedded in the field and to participate in the lives of the people under investigation. Plugging oneself into the local context, the ethnographer observes the commonsense and pays close attention to everyday details that construct such commonsense. Sometimes one could see the self as a research "tool," which elicits questions from the locals. These questions can be pivotal for further understanding of the commonsense: only through understanding the "abnormal" can one grasp a fuller picture of the "normal."[8] To me, this is the beauty of ethnographic work and shows how ethnographic work cannot be replaced by other qualitative research methodologies, such as discourse analysis, grounded theory, interviews, etc.

More importantly, a few words on my specific emphasis on the person-centered ethnographic research approach are warranted, because I will portray my informants' experiences in great details in the subsequent ethnographic chapters. A person-centered approach offers a "powerful way of grounding social psychological, and biological theories of human behavior in the lived experience of real people" (Hollan, 2001, cited in Levy and Hollan, 2015). This approach is increasingly popular in anthropological discussions on medicine, psychology, and morality (for instance, Kleinman and Kleinman, 1991; Hollan, 2001; Yan, 2003). A primary goal of this approach is "to listen

---

[8] See Bashkow, 2009 for the use of this particular technique in ethnographic research.

to accounts of subjective experience with an ear towards how subjectivity has been influenced by social surroundings (Hollan, 2001, p. 53). Key questions that person-centered ethnography could answer include: How are individuals constituted by their contexts? To what degree and in what way are they at least partially autonomous individuals, engaged in a dynamic (sometimes coercive, sometimes enabling) interplay with a context that is in some way separate and alien to them? For China expert Yunxiang Yan, the person-centered ethnography means a return to a tradition of detailed ethnography, with a new focus on "individual experience and agency rather than social structure or cultural norms" (Yan, 2003, p.10). Hence, a person-centered approach allows individual narratives to grow from fieldwork, and leaves room for special emphasis on the agencies and perspectives of my informants. As I will show in subsequent ethnographic chapters, there is a larger cultural framework embedded in my interpretations of informant narratives on volunteering and doing good.

Lastly, although I come to this study with a critical stance on volunteering and service-learning programs, my primary concern is not to challenge the participants. Rather, I aim to understand the cultured logic about their activity and how it reflects ideas concerning development, global citizenship, and the contemporary Chinese self. More importantly, I hope to unravel the converging and competing logics of development work as they are negotiated, taught, practiced, embodied, and contested on the ground.

To sum up, my approach to this study is person-centered (Levy and Hollan, 2015; Rolandsen, 2008) and actor-oriented (Fechter, 2012). I do not attempt to answer the question what volunteering "is" or to evaluate whether the volunteer program has achieved its intended purposes and why. Rather, my goal is to show what is it like to live

there on an "aidland" (Handman and Fechter, 2011) whose inhabitants are the "helpers" and the "helped."

Positionality Statement

To understand human beings means to investigate the *intersubjectivities,* the spaces that are formed in interactions between and amongst the subjectivities human beings embody, as well as between myself as a researcher and the human beings around me. Such spaces are fluid, messy, chaotic, and usually imbued with power dynamics. The fluid nature of these spaces all the more require investigators to carefully peek into the spaces without reducing people to rational animals, or worse, quantifiable indicators. After all, there is no clear divide between anthropologist and subject, or fieldwork and the processes of everyday social life in the field (Mosse, 2006). Thus, we can easily dismiss any claims of research as an "objective enterprise." Sociologist Khan (2011) puts this issue brilliantly: "objectivity is often a false mask that researchers hide behind in order to assert their scientific authority… to stand outside people, looking in at their lives as if they were in some laboratory or snow globe, is not to understand them" (p. 201). I concur. To study human beings requires empathy; the ontological and epistemological paradigm of ethnography as a methodology precisely presupposes "empathy" in the research process.

Also, it is particularly important to note the "personal, informal, and tacit theories" involved in the framing of ethnographic research so as to set the conditions for a "disciplined subjectivity" (Erickson, 1984, p. 59). In this section, I briefly note how my personal background has influenced my intellectual endeavor.

Born and raised in China, I spent the majority of my life in Tianjin and Beijing, two metropolitan cities thirty-minutes away from each other by bullet trains located in northern China. As I moved to the United States in pursuit of a Master's Degree in International Education and Development at the University of Maryland, College Park, I became curious about Chinese citizens' perceptions about and engagements with their homeland, China. The trainings I received in the Social Foundations program in the Curry School and in the Department of Anthropology pushed me to think critically and empirically about this issue. Hence, I settled on this ethnographic project as the culmination of my doctoral study. As such, this project bears personal salience. Through my time in the field, I saw the many other faces of China, to which I had not been exposed prior to my fieldwork. With the reflexive mandate in ethnography that "inform[ed] and empower[ed] [my] intuition rather than stifle[d] it" (Erickson, 1984, p. 52), my "native" Chinese eyes helped me to see China as a somewhat "foreign" land. In a sense, China is never "native" to me again.

This leads to another point of clarification that relates to my "insider and/or outsider" status during fieldwork. Different from classic anthropological studies, where the researcher is a clear outsider in the eyes of the locals, in my project, the researcher bears deep resemblances to the people under investigation. I am an overseas-educated Chinese student who recognizes defects of the current Chinese education system and the society at large, and I was a volunteer for similar projects before. However, the dissertation project is *not* an auto-ethnography, in which the focal point of analyses is the self; rather, this project is about accessing the insider's perspectives and bring these under scrutiny from the outsider's point of view. In this sense, the "I" as an insider think from

the perspectives of the organization, while the "I" as an outsider stem from the perspective of conducting North American academic endeavors. The ethnographic reflexivity requires the researcher to look beyond the insider's perspective and to understand the organizational activities from the perspective of an ethnographer.

My Role in *Zhiyou Jihua*

With my primary concern of a particular group's approach to educational development, my central research "objects" are overseas-educated Chinese students who conduct service-learning programs *in situ*. As such, I chose to embed myself in an organization that routinely runs such programs. This enables me to trace and document the program from its inception to the end. The organization under investigation is what I call *Zhiyou Jihua* Project (ZY Project hereafter), a non-governmental organization originally founded in Boston and now based in Beijing and Changsha, Hunan province, China. Bearing in mind the importance of the local school context, I also stayed in one of its partner high schools so as to document the changes and impacts these programs and people left to the local students and school.

Fieldwork Access and Reciprocity

I got to know about ZY Project through an American graduate student studying sociology in a major research university in the U.S.. Interested in the rise of philanthropy in China, he participated into ZY Project's 2014 Winter Program. Through email, he introduced me to Niu Huang, ZY Project's central figure, to whom I sent a draft of my research proposal that was awkwardly translated into Chinese. Niu Huang then invited

me to the Beijing headquarter to chat about fieldwork arrangements in summer 2015. As I mentioned my knowledge about and teaching experiences with the American education system and my background in anthropology, he gladly and generously agreed to provide me access to the organization and its field sites. At that point, I was pleasantly surprised. Compared to my previous negotiations with other organizations that were arguably superficial and administratively complicated and without fruitions, Niu Huang seemed very accommodating and understanding. When I asked him about whether having an ethnographer would compromise "secrets" of the organization, he responded, half-jokingly and half seriously, "I did a graduate degree in America as well. We intellectuals do not need to add more hurdles to one another. Being an intellectual is hard enough to begin with."

With ZY Project's endorsement, my access to Changpu No.1 High School was easier. During the first time that I travelled to Changpu in early November, when ZY Project's Director of Program Operation introduced me as a graduate student studying in an American university, the school principal came over to me and told me that his daughter was pursuing a Master's degree in computer science in America too, and he would very much welcome me to stay at the school. In particular, he said, "you can teach the children some English. Our school doesn't have good English teachers. You can teach them." During my fieldwork time in Changpu and at some other places, almost all other local teachers said something similar to me.

Hence, my reciprocity in ZY Project and in the field was relatively straightforward. ZY Project needed me to help out with their curriculum development and volunteer training sessions. Specifically, I proofread and offered my advice on ZY Project's training

materials and curriculum development for the Community Engagement Project and Digital Storytelling project. I also lectured the volunteers on "empathy" and some teaching techniques in the training sessions. For short-term volunteers, I introduced myself as an ethnographer and as someone helping out in ZY Project's activities. Given my experiences with English academic writing, the graduate school application process, and studying a humanity discipline in a graduate school in America, some of them sought advice about their future academic pursuits and even requested recommendation letters from me for their various applications. These conversations helped to establish rapports with my informants. Later, some of them also asked me to edit their graduate school application essays and cover letters, and I remain in touch with ZY Project and volunteers after I came back to the U.S.. In Changpu No.1 High School, I spent the majority of my time in the ZY Space, talking to students and tutoring English grammar from time to time. I also hanged out with students in the girl's dormitory, on the playground, in the guitar club and the piano room, as well as in the school cafeterias. In a sense, in the eyes of ZY Project, I am a semi-staff member, always "watching" them and collecting materials and feedback from the local schools for myself and for the organization, while in the eyes of provincial schools, I am someone similar to the well-intentioned volunteers who were willing to stay long term in an "underdeveloped" area for a long time.

Data Collection Activities

During the 2015-2016 academic year, I conducted twelve months of ethnographic research with ZY Project. I split my time in China into two parts. I spent four months in the organization's headquarter in Beijing and eight months in Changpu County, Hunan,

where one of ZY Project's oldest partner school locates. I stayed in Beijing from September 2015 to January 2016, during which time I rented an apartment in the outskirt of the city's 5th ring road and travel to the headquarter located on the 3rd ring. Time spent in the headquarter familiarized me with ZY Project's everyday operations. Knowing about my intentions of staying in a local school and observing the programs on-the-ground, Niu Huang, head of the organization, generously offered me opportunities to visit ZY Project's partnered schools in Hunan at the beginning of November, and brought me to work as a part-time employee for its Department of Curriculum Development. After witnessing two of ZY Project's special winter programs and visiting ZY Project's school sites, I decided to stay in Changpu No.1 High School in Changpu County, Shaoyang City, Hunan Province for the next phase of my fieldwork. I chose Changpu No.1 High School because of the relative "objectivity" that the principal offered me in terms of my time in Changpu. Compared to other partner schools, Changpu No.1 High School would place less demand on me teaching large classes or ask me to represent the school in higher level administrations (although in fact I did tutor students English and represented the school in a local TV news station). In Changpu, I lived in the school's girl's dormitory with Tan Hongyuan, another long-term volunteer working in ZY Space. Hongyuan (along with many other informants) has become a close friend of mine as time went by: she volunteered to observe the program and afforded me critical information about ZY Project in her eyes and in the students' eyes. Towards the end of my fieldwork, Hongyuan always voluntarily reported her observations on the volunteers and the short term programs.

Moreover, between May to July, 2017, I spent two more months in the field, primarily revisiting the students and teachers that I was in close contact with. I also participated in the volunteer training sessions and the concluding ceremony. Revisiting the field afforded me critical opportunities to understand students' long-term learnings from the organization's educational opportunities, as well as to check my analyses of the organization.

Making Sense of the Field

In constructing my analyses of the volunteer programs and the volunteers, I draw on materials—in oral and written forms—I collected during the twelve months of fieldwork. Most of the materials deal with the daily practices of people living and working "on the ground" in Changpu No.1 High School in ZY Project, and its headquarter in Beijing. In addition, I draw on documents and interviews with more distant actors to demonstrate how these modes of defining and fulfilling rural-urban inequalities are linked to expansive global imaginaries, practices, and network with people. Below I describe the specifics of data collection. In general, my data collection and analysis processes are informed by ethnographic writers such as Khan (2011) and Sanjek (2014).

Data Collection

Documents

A major body of materials that I analyze for the purpose of this dissertation is the curricular materials I collected during my time in ZY Project. These include different

versions of syllabi, lesson plans, and reference materials that the organization's staff used for its volunteer training sessions, its Core Ability courses, Community Engagement Project, and Digital Storytelling Project. I also collected ZY Project's training handbooks and worksheets used in volunteer training workshops. As for the volunteers, I collected the syllabi and lesson plans for their independently designed seminars. As volunteers are simultaneously dispersed in different field sites during the summer volunteering programs, I also collected the evolvement and adaptations of the original materials in Changpu to the best I could. In discussing these materials with informants, I also kept some annotations about these materials. For instance, I jotted down ways that they commented on the topic of a seminar and the feasibility of the activities, and so on.

I also collected the organization's publicity materials. These include promotional videos, messages from ZY Project's WeChat official channel, and an official story book the organization made for documenting ZY Project student life stories.

Materials from social media platforms

Social media platforms are playing an increasingly important role in people's lives around the world; China is no exception. During my time in the field, I paid specific attention to my informants' usage of various social media applications, particularly those of WeChat and QQ, two of the most popular SNS platforms in China. In addition to the instant messaging function, both WeChat and QQ give individual users a space where they are free to post pictures and words they would like to share with other people, including friends and/or strangers using the applications. This is called Moments in WeChat and QQ Space in the QQ application. Organizations could also sign-up for

official accounts on WeChat, which allows them to publish new articles to the channel's subscribers. Individual users could repost these messages to their Moment or QQ Space feed as well.

Hence, I collected materials from these platforms. For my informants, after adding them as friends in the application, I saved screenshots on their commentaries about social issues in China, pictures with captions about ZY Project and volunteering in the individual Moment or QQ Space feeds. Recognizing that these posts are only open to WeChat friends, I double-checked with the authors of the posts on confidentiality concerns. Together, I saved about fifty Moment updates (ranging from 10-300 Chinese characters each) and photos (one to nine photos each)[9] posted along with such updates. On the side of the organization, I paid attention to their publicity materials, including news updates about volunteering programs, fundraising, and recruitments. I saved about twenty essay postings (about 200-300 Chinese characters each) from this venue.

Participant observations and fieldnotes

I kept writing daily fieldnotes to the best I could during my time in the field. These notes were written in Scrivener, where I catalogue them in chronological order. In my fieldnotes, I documented the people I met and conversations I had about ZY Project and overseas-educated Chinese people. I also jotted down key words of revealing conversations on my phone on-the-go, and later synchronized these notes onto my computer.

---

[9] WeChat does not pose a length limit on the text of the Moment updates; it allows users to post a maximum of nine pictures per post.

There are specifically three domains where I conducted participant observations. Firstly, during my time in Beijing, I participated in the daily operations of the organization. This included their weekly office meetings and inter-departmental meetings. For the most time, because of my identity as an anthropologist, people in the office took it for granted that I would keep good notes of their meetings. Hence, I was always the designated note-taker and the person that people came back to and asked about the last sentence in the previous conversation. I took these occasions as opportunities to take notes on the long-winded discussions about seemingly trivial matters. Sometimes I took pictures of the meeting notes I jotted down on the board and included these photos in my field note files. I then supplement these "meeting notes" with my observations.

The second domain of participant observation was my time with ZY Project's volunteering programs, including the training sessions, the programs, and the concluding ceremonies. I participated into three major programs in full lengths. First, as one of the two ZY Project people that could communicate in English fluently, I helped out the ZY Project winter special program with a major China-US partner university. This program took place in Jianghua county, another ZY Project partner school in southern Hunan in December 2015. Then I participated in two programs in Changpu County, one in April 2016 and the other in July 2016. I took detailed notes about what happened during the programs, including comments from the volunteers, students, local teachers, and ZY Project staff. These notes were sometimes taken with my phone on the occasion, as I would like to preserve the richness of the conversations.

The last domain that I concentrated on for participant observations was in Changpu No.1 High School when school was in session. I treated the ZY Space as a central anchor

point that linked students' everyday life at school together. As such, I hanged out with students and participated in the activities that ZY Fellow did with the students. These activities include reading poetry, watching films, and doing Community Engagement Projects, putting together jigsaw puzzles, etc. I also tutored English grammar once every other day for about 30 minutes for the students, who requested me to do so after they overheard my English conversations with some American volunteers in April. The tutoring sessions lasted from mid-April to the end of June.

I tried to treat the activity of writing fieldnotes as a regular daily ritual. After I documented the what, why, when, and where of incidents, I also wrote some analytic memos and topics of literature that I would need to refer to as side notes. I also copied and pasted the fragmented notes in my phone to the Scrivener document. If I did not have time to translate these words into writing in paragraph form on the day, I would flag the document and come back to it later. I also included quotes I came across in reading the book collections in ZY Space.

Semi-open and casual interviews

I conducted semi-open and casual interviews with my informants. This method emphasizes what Sanjek (1990) referred to as "situated listening" and "speech-in-action participant-observation" (p. 233), as opposed to "formal interviews with seated informants" (p.246). Due to the unexpected nature of everyday life, the majority of my interviews happened on the spot. That is, if I encountered a comment or an activity that I found particularly revealing and relevant to the project, I would ask probing questions to

my informants for their explanation about their activities. These conversations form the bulk of my interviews in the field.

One particular elicitation method I used in this project is to ask my informants to read and comment on scholarly writings and / or popular commentaries that are potentially critiquing the work of development. At times, I bring up examples of the curriculum in an American boarding school or critiques on the educational development projects of World Bank, and ask my informants to compare and contrast what they are doing and what other anthropologists have critiqued on. I have found this method particularly helpful in revealing the rationales behind their own works in the rural country side.

Towards the end of fieldwork, I also asked volunteers and staff members for semi-open interviews. Recognizing the intersubjective dimension and the particularity of interview as a form of speech act, I conducted about fifteen interviews mainly for the purpose of double checking my interpretations of their activities. I asked questions such as, "please describe a normal day of your volunteering experience," "what motivated you to sign up for ZY Project's program," "describe the most remarkable moment you had in the field," "what have you learned from working with rural students and with ZY Project, about teaching in particular, and in general," "what would you do differently if you were given a chance to work with the students you taught," and so on. Apart from these prepared interview questions, I also used some individual examples or quotes that I documented, as well as the WeChat or QQ updates as elicitation tools for interviewee's richer narratives about their rationales and behaviors. These interviews were audio-recorded. I wrote notes about these conversations in my fieldnotes as well.

WeChat conversations

As an ethnographer, I have benefited enormously from my informants' trust in me, not as an ethnographer *per se*, but as a human being who shared similar challenges and conundrums in life. Upon finishing the bulk of my fieldwork, I remained in touch with key informants (who I would rather regard as friends). Subsequently, I had numerous conversations with them, venting about our doubts and disappointments on the modern—in the Weberian sense—academia and society in general. These conversations usually started with casual chatting about my progress in dissertation writing and of graduate school applications and job search. Then they shared with me their new thoughts on volunteering and ZY Project and what they had learned after they finished their tenures as volunteers or full-time workers. These conversations provided key contexts, with which I was able to develop new interpretations and arguments. Hence, I saved and translated related conversations on WeChat, as part of critical data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in ethnographic fieldwork is characterized as a process of discovery (Sanjek, 2014), especially in the writing process. I treated data analysis and collection as two processes in dialogue with one another. My analytic memos are the first steps in making sense of my informants' subjective worlds. As I came upon a tentative "conclusion" to a puzzle that I spotted in the field, I did member check and triangulations with informants using my time hanging out with informants. With the writing process, I also sent chapter drafts or write-ups of vignettes to my informants, eliciting their

comments. The fact that most of my informants are well-educated individuals who possess high levels of self-reflexivity aided me enormously: they sometimes came to me and offered their comments about how they would approach the topic if they were doing my project. They also gave formal and informal comments to some of my writings.

Formal data analysis commenced upon my return from the field in September 2016. Originally following Erickson's (1986) analytic induction research strategy, I read fieldnotes and generated assertions about key themes that emerged from the material. Yet most themes and claims emerged from the process of writing the dissertation itself: I started out writing a key scene in order to explain its meaning, and then found out that the scene could speak to larger themes that I did not notice in the activity of reading fieldnotes alone. Hence, I kept writing, and then moved different pieces around for a coherent narrative. Lastly, I put my assertions into dialogues with existing literatures for further theorization of the project.

In terms of interview data, I transcribed and translated the parts that are relevant to my writing. I did not select the passages randomly. That is, I selected these passages based on my holistic understanding about the conversations in relation to themes that emerged during fieldnote analysis and analytic memo writing. I specifically relied on the synopses of the conversations I wrote in the fieldnotes, and listened to the interview recordings to note key passages for the purpose of transcription.

Fieldwork Ethics

Ethnographic research is inevitably imbued with ethical issues. At its narrowest, besides protecting the anonymity of the involved individuals and communities, the

ethnographer needs to make oneself known in the community as a fieldworker, studying the "people" and collecting information from the people in everyday settings. This means that the people around him or her need to understand what this "newcomer" is doing around them, and how this person would make use of the information he or she collects and of the experiences when he or she is living around them (see Khan, 2011; Sanjek, 2014).

Thus, during my time in the field, I tried as much as I could to make myself clear to ZY Project staff and volunteers that my first "identity tag" was an ethnographer conducting research about overseas-educated Chinese students' approaches to educational development in China. In general, since my informants had some knowledge about research in the qualitative tradition, they acknowledged my presence as an observer. When I encountered some revealing remarks in group settings, I tried to follow up with my informants by asking whether I could note the conversation in my dissertation. I also ask them to pick a pseudonym of their choice to be used in the dissertation. For volunteers and teachers that I have formally interviewed in the field, I asked for oral consents and have recorded them at the beginning of the audio recordings.

Moreover, my project deals with three major ethical issues. Firstly, working with an organization—with well-educated individuals—means that the originally clear-cut Malinowskian boundary between the "field" and the "desk" is greatly blurred. This blurring generates a wealth of ethical issues (see Mosse, 2006, 2015; Lashaw, 2012). Recognizing the relational nature of knowledge in ethnographic fieldwork, I tackle this issue by portraying the organization and its people in an intersubjective way. My intention is not to stand outside the organization and to evaluate the effectiveness or

efficacy of ZY Project and its programs. Rather, my goal is to understand the processes through which these programs achieve their intended and unintended outcomes from an outsider-cum-insider perspective. In other words, my ethnographic analysis is a *positioned* interpretation but not an evaluation (Khan, 2011; Mosse, 2005, 2006; Lashaw, 2012). I depart from the managerial view, and do not critique the people and their intentions as who and what they are. In fact, I do not think that these people are exclusively to blame for the possible negative outcomes that result from their work. Due to my own cultural and studying background, I would admit the organization's failures as "personal failings, but [I] also see them as prefigured by the structural and discursive conditions of a development project" (Mouse, 2006, p. 941). In other words, I do not doubt my own or others' sincerity or commitment to alleviating rural-urban inequality and fostering educational reforms in the alienating and fragmented Chinese education system; on the other hand, what I write in this dissertation speaks to larger structural and cultural issues that render the failure or the success of the programs—and similar development initiatives—inevitable.

Another critical ethical issue relates to my participant observations with high school students in Changpu. As I entered my field site as someone affiliated with ZY Project, students at the beginning assumed that I was another "elder sister" from ZY. Gradually, relationships between the students and I grew closer. In addition to being a "sister" and a friend always willing to listen to their complaints as well as hanging out with them as someone who does not belong to Changpu, I told them that I was a graduate student studying in a foreign country and I also had my "homework" to do. I needed to "write a long essay about what happens between big sisters and brothers (like me and other

volunteers they met) with children like them." I also told them that what they said might be included in my future writing, and if there were ever going be a chance that I might publish a book, they could appear as one of the main characters. At first, they felt quite puzzled because they did not understand why someone "old" like me still had homework to do. Yet gradually, the students got to understand that my "essay" —the dissertation— was not an easy task to accomplish: just as how they came over to me and scratched their heads, asking how to write eight-hundred-word essays for their Chinese teachers, I scratched my heads in writing my "essay" as well. To some extent, the children shared with me the common student sentiment that "we all have homework to do." Later, some of them even came to me, joking that they would want me to autograph book copies for them if I managed to get my writing published in the future. To these requests, I humbly said yes. I would certainly hope that the students would eventually see themselves in my writing and echo with my interpretations about their daily lives in relation to ZY Project, and that my writing would help them to reflect on their own educational experiences later on in their lives.

A Few Words of Caution

Before delving into the first ethnographic chapter, I turn to a few words on my intellectual struggles throughout the fieldwork stage of this project.

First, although I bore a critical frame of mind before entering the field about the privileged socioeconomic background of my potential informants, I did not expect them to be so well-versed in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. My informants' educational background often made them very curious about my fieldwork and my

potential arguments. Moreover, with the different kinds of experiences my informants had

with the organization, they came to me with drastically different, and sometimes even

opposite, "suggestions" about what I "should" be writing about. Shaling, a key informant

that I met on the first day, usually joked that she "sacrifices herself in providing fieldwork

materials for Chenyu." She also suggested books that she thought would be helpful for

my project, such as *Making Volunteers* written by Nina Eliasoph (2011) and *The Politics*

of Compassion by Xu Bin (2017). As I write in Chapter 8, Shaling is highly critical about

ZY Project and does not feel herself as part of the organization. Some others, such as

Wang Tao, were generous enough to share with me the touching and sometimes

disappointing moments of his experience, saying that these were "different from the ZY

Project of others so they have to be included in your [my] dissertation." As a lot of them

were interested in reading about what I write and some, who "trusted my intellectual

caliber," told me that whatever I write should become a key reading material in

subsequent ZY Project orientations, I wrestle with the framework through which I should

tell their stories. I also fear that eventually, they would disagree with what I write because

of the theoretical framework that I believe could be used to explain the stories. Their

disagreements, however, turned out to be key in understanding the diverse volunteering

experiences in relation to the formation of new selfhood. As my task is to document and

present the experiences of the volunteers and to explain these experiences, I do not expect

that every one of my informants, however well-read they are, to agree with my

interpretation due to the different theoretical orientations.

  That some of the volunteers were able to disagree and challenge my

interpretations using academic language led to my other intellectual struggle. That is, I

struggled with entering into even the everyday conversations between my informants sometimes. Some of them were well-read enough that their casual conversations resembled some of my graduate school seminars. Avid readers of Western and Eastern literature and philosophy, my informants cited these materials while discussing topics related to ZY Project as well as Chinese politics. At first, such conversations were overwhelming: as an ethnographer, I cringed about my limited knowledge in the humanities and feared that my incompetence would shut myself off from my informants' intellectual worlds. Hence, I spent a significant amount of time catching up on this vocabulary during the first few months of fieldwork and learned much about philosophy and literature through conversations with my informants. In a sense, although I am a native Mandarin speaker with basic proficiency in Hunan dialect, I do not speak the intellectual language of some of my informants, and it took me some time to learn to do so. Just as other ethnographers working in white collar, elite settings who struggle with fieldwork access and networking with people in power (see Ho, 2009), I struggle with similar issues. For this reason, I do not expect my informants to fully agree with my interpretations of their stories. In fact, I had sent early and later drafts of my dissertation to some of them eliciting feedbacks and comments. These have been proven helpful in understanding my informants' views on the volunteer experiences.

Lastly, I should note that a missing analytic domain in this dissertation is the increasing gender disparity among the volunteers as well as full-time workers in Chinese NGOs as a whole. Most of the volunteers as well as development workers were female. So were the students in the programs. As I spotted the significance of the gender element after I came back from fieldwork, I had not gathered enough ethnographic material to

write an entire chapter on this topic. Hence, I try to spread it out in the dissertation and intend to further investigate the construction of ideal masculinity and femininity in relation to career ambition and life trajectories in my next project.

Chapter 4: ZY Project from Past to Present: Forming a Cosmopolitan Ideal

This is a background chapter that introduces the basics of ZY Project and its current situation. Using documents and ethnographic interviews, I weave together the history of ZY Project, highlighting its localization process. I show that, from a student organization to an officially registered NGO working in the field of Chinese rural education, ZY Project underwent a lot of change, including the bureaucratization and localization of its daily operation, the diversification of its personnel's academic background, as well as the "PBL-ization" of its original educational model. Through these changes, I also highlight the formation of a "local ideal" from the perspective of the organization. In consciously changing its educational model and the personnel composition, ZY Project gradually adapts itself into the context of Chinese education and the field of educational NGOs in China. This adaptation paves the way of forming the cosmopolitan ideal, which I explain in the following chapters.

Localizing an International Chinese Student Organization to a Chinese NGO

Founded in 2007 in Boston as a student organization by a group of Chinese students studying at elite universities in the U.S., *Zhiyou Jihua* Project is an officially-registered NGO dedicated to alleviating urban-rural inequality in China. Without going into much details about the meaning of the organization's real name, it should be noted that the organization's official Chinese name did not come into existence until 2012, and

is not a direct translation from its original English name. Also, the original English name has an obtuse and archaic English word that a key informant once said "he has only seen this word here in ZY Project and not anywhere else." Drawing a link between peer and friendship, Niu Huang, one of ZY Project's co-founder and now the Executive Director always stress on the concept of "peer education," meaning learning from each other in his narration of the vision of the organization. Due to the link between the name of the organization and its educational concept, ZY Project has various terminologies that aim at differentiate itself from the other NGOs. For instance, the ZY Project refers to its volunteers as "people with sincere hopes," which in Chinese, is pronounced exactly same as the Chinese translation of "volunteer" (*zhiyuan zhe*). The only difference between the ZY lingo and the Chinese is the replacement of a character in ZY's original name and a character in *zhiyuan zhe* . However, due to the easy pronunciation and the popularity of the English name, apart from publicity purposes, seldom does anyone refer the Chinese name of ZY Project. Rather, its English name is used in the everyday conversation among the staff and volunteers.

Originally a self-initiated student organization, ZY Project was founded by three Chinese undergraduate students studying in universities in the Boston area in 2007. Started off from a conversation in a basement in Cambridge, MA, at that time, the organization was largely an on-campus intercollegiate student club, organizing summer teaching programs in rural schools in China. In 2010, ZY Project combined with another student organization that did similar English teaching program in rural China. From its very inception, ZY Project established its own original model of education. That is, it offered seminars of liberal art contents and English lessons to high school students in

rural, underdeveloped areas in China. At that time, ZY Project's programs took place only in the summers, and did not have full-time employees. Most of its events happened on the university campuses in the United States: the only time these students, including its executive members, came to China was during the summers, for pre-site orientations and the programs. The organization did not need a huge budget for its operations: literally, all were volunteers who paid the majority of expenses out of their own pocket. In short, ZY Project was an intercollegiate student organization run by Chinese undergraduate students educated in liberal arts colleges and universities in the United States.

After several twist and turns of its management in the early days, Niu Huang, one of the co-founders of ZY Project became the official head the organization. Having graduated from his alma mater with a Master's degree in East Asian Studies in 2010, Niu Huang came back to China to work, firstly as an assistant to a university professor and institute director in an elite Chinese university in Beijing. This marked an important shift in ZY Project's history: the executive operation was brought from Boston back to Beijing. Niu Huang's office and spaces at the university where he worked for became ZY Project's office space. With Niu Huang's presence and effort, the organization tapped into the student networks of Chinese universities in Beijing, and began to recruit from these universities into its pool of summer volunteers. Later, dissatisfied with the institutional bureaucracies of Chinese universities, Niu Huang decided to work full time for ZY Project, becoming its first full-time employee.

Adapting to the Chinese Education System: Diversifying Program Provision

Under the leadership of Niu Huang, ZY Project gradually expanded the scope and diversity of its program offerings. From a student organization that only ran short-term summer programs, ZY Project now has expanded its program provisions to several fronts. Apart from the summer program, it also runs a winter special program, a long-term ZY Fellow program, and a Teacher Support program. Statistics show that ZY Project has run 72 short-term programs with over 1,100 long- and short-term volunteers, and had reached 4,200 students, not including those students who study in ZY Project's partner schools but are not directly involved in the programs.

While details of the summer program—the focus of this dissertation—are spelled out in later sections of this dissertation, here, it is important to note that the summer program has gradually taken a backseat in the organization's activities. This is because the other two programs—the long-term Fellow program and the Teacher Support program—run through the regular school years and can elicit more participation from the end of the local teachers. In this dissertation, I focus on the short-term summer program to show the self-work of the volunteers.

The organization has built strategic partnerships with a few non-profit organizations and private foundations, started student chapters on Chinese university campuses for recruitment purposes, and also run partnership programs with other organizations. It has systematized the location of its partner schools. According to several alumni, the first several partnerships mostly no longer exist, while the active partnerships are largely concentrated in Hunan, Guizhou, and Guangxi Provinces. In 2015, Niu Huang explained to me that, the plan was to follow suit of other local NGOs that he had visited:

in order to deepen its local influence, ZY Project needs to "get rooted in one or two provinces for its daily operations." Since some of the oldest partnerships ZY Project established were located in Hunan Province and Principal Songzi, one of the organization's Board members and head of one of the oldest partner schools, was based in Hunan, most of ZY Project's partner schools were located in Hunan province. With ZY Project's strategic partnerships with local NGOs in China, it started to operate in schools in other provinces, such as in provinces of Zhejiang and Jilin.

Most of the organization's partner schools are the No.1 high schools at the county level, located in central and western China, which are known for their rich natural resources, ethnic diversity, and relatively remote geographical location from central China.[10] For example, the school where I conducted fieldwork is located in Changpu County (pseudonym). In 2017, about 63% of the inhabitants belong to ethnic minority groups, such as the Miao (苗族), Tujia (土家族), and Dong (侗族). Changpu is only accessible by bus, and is recognized as one of the "national poverty counties." Residents are registered under the rural *hukou*. However, since 2010, the county has been developing its tourist industry, aiming at fashioning itself to become a tourist destination famous for its ethnic diversity. As one of the two county level high schools in the nearby area, most of the students in Changpu No.1 High School are from the townships and

---

[10] Perhaps the remoteness is best described using a local idiom, *Xiang Xi Chu Tu Fei* (湘西出土匪), literally translated as "Western Hunan is the place where bandits arise." Knowing that I am from northern China and was unfamiliar with the local geography, a parent of a student joked to me that the extent to which this county was inaccessible could be best exemplified by the Anti-Japanese war between 1937 and 1945. He joked that "even the Japanese couldn't get into these mountains during the Eight Year War!" A student also told me that he thought Changpu was underdeveloped because of the long hours he had to spend going out or coming back to his hometown.

villages that are administratively located under the Changpu County. These townships and villages are sometimes a few hours of bus ride away, making it impossible for most students to go back home every day. Therefore, Changpu No.1 High School provide school dormitories to the students. In turn, it runs on a full schedule, from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. everyday so as to "keep an eye on" the students (*guan zhu* 管住, literally translated as "to govern"). Besides morning and evening studying periods, students have nine 45-minute class periods every day (see Kipnis, 2001 and Hansen, 2013). Every Sunday students have four periods off. Each month the school gives students a two-to-three-day monthly holiday for them to travel back home.

With ZY Project's expansion and its growing program provision, it has asked most partner schools to host its multiple programs. In the case of Changpu No.1 High School, it has become a host of the ZY Space program and later began to send interested teachers to participate in the Teacher's Training program. From the school's perspective, ZY Project summer program has become a ritual that they would participate in every year.

In a sense, creating long-term programs and partnering with the teachers serve the goal of the organization: now, its programs run throughout the year, and are open to not only students, but also the teachers. ZY Project has also shifted its focus from solely providing short-term out-of-school programs, to providing teacher supports. These changes were attempts to integrate itself into the Chinese school system.

Integration into the Field of Chinese NGOs: ZY Project's Growing

Bureaucratization

Due to the personnel demands of these programs, the organization has gradually

built a full-time executive team of four, each of whom heads his/her own department.

These include the Department of Curriculum Development, the Department of Program

Operations, the Department of Operations, and the Department of Human Resources.

Apart from the Director of Curriculum Development, who graduated from an elite

Chinese university and then obtained a Master's degree from a top university in the

United States, the other three full-time employees were educated in China and two of

them had previous working experiences prior to joining ZY Project. The organization

also started to officially hire university students from universities in Beijing as paid

interns and unpaid volunteers to assist its everyday operations, primarily during the fall

and spring semesters, when its original pool of participants—those who are educated

abroad—are not in China. Reporting mostly to directors of curriculum development and

project operation departments, the interns and part-time employees are responsible for

writing curriculums and preparing publicity materials (including the weekly WeChat[11]

updates for WeChat channel subscribers), and helping out with logistics. In this way, the

daily operation of the organization is mostly sustained by its full-time workers as well as

the student interns in Chinese universities.

---

[11] WeChat is the most popular Chinese social media site. Individual users can subscribe
to Official Channels of various organizations, which disseminate newsfeed to the
channel's subscribers.

The funding sources shifted from the U.S. to China as well. Having been officially registered as a *minban* (民办, literally translated as people-run, i.e. non-governmental) non-enterprise unit with the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Civil Affairs, in its daily operations, ZY Project also needs to conform to the rules and regulations of the Chinese state government. This conformity includes having the correct paperwork for auditioning purposes as well as dealing with legal consultants when drafting partnership agreements with other organizations. Niu Huang was particularly cautious to the funding resources of the organization. In his words, "ZY Project won't touch foreign money" due to the "political climate in China." He later explained to me that some of the money that the organization had received before came from foreign donors, however, after becoming fully registered as an NGO in Beijing, the organization would strictly only funding sources from domestic agencies and sources. With ZY Project's growing number of personnel and its expanding scope of operations, it also needs more financial resource for its operational cost. Despite the personal connections that the Board has access to, ZY Project also needs to come to terms with its own funding resources. The partnerships ZY Project has built with Chinese universities and private domestic charity foundations then serves dual purposes: such partnerships could not only make the organization known to other organizations in the burgeoning NGO realm, but also, with the organization's experiences in organizing and leading short-term programs and volunteer trainings and the vast pool of curricula accumulated throughout the years, ZY Project also provides paid consulting services to other organizations.

An ensuing change is the venue and frequency of ZY Project's publicity. As a student group with a summer program, before ZY Project moved back to Beijing, it

communicated via online Google Groups and Google Talk, and primarily used mailing lists of American universities for recruitment purposes. They also set up Facebook pages and used social media venues to expand on the impact among the international undergraduate student circle. Thus, the organization had limited publicity materials for the public: due to its limited program organizations, it only published progress reports over the summer, when their programs were in session. Most of the volunteers got to know the news of the other groups through personal emails and sometimes photos posted on Weibo.com and Xiaonei.com. However, with the organization's relocation from Boston to Beijing, the organization greatly expanded its publicity venues and frequencies. The official communication platform has become WeChat, a popular social media platform that integrates functions of personal communication and official communications that rose to extreme popularity in China after around 2012. As the organization opened an official WeChat channel that allows for interested individuals to subscribe to its news updates, ZY Project's staff and volunteers are under enormous pressure to come up with intriguing posts for recruitment and publicity purposes. In 2015, new posts were sent on a weekly basis, with more frequent updates of its short-term programs in the summer. However, with the establishment of the new ZY Space program (which I will write about in the following section), the organization has increased its frequency of WeChat updates, with new posts up on a daily basis. The recruitment messages are disseminated via this platform as well, spread out by volunteers and other interested individuals following the channel. Therefore, an important agenda of the weekly staff meeting is to figure out the sequence of the daily new posts and make sure

that ZY Project has something to publish every day. The summer programs also require

volunteers to take photos and write weekly updates when the programs are in session.

The Office Locations: Moving from Virtual Space to Beijing and Then to Hunan

With the organization's shift from Boston to Beijing and from a student

organization to an official Chinese NGO with full-time and part-time staff members, ZY

Project also moved its headquarter out of the student activity spaces in American and

Chinese universities. Instead, with the personal connections it has, in late 2013, ZY

Project obtained an office space located on the 3rd Eastern Ring in Beijing, known for the

congregations of financial towers and luxury department stores in the city. In June 2016,

due to the expansion of its operation scope, ZY Project secured a second office space in a

building for start-up companies and social entrepreneurs in the outskirt of Changsha city,

the capital of Hunan Province, where most of ZY Project's partner schools are located.

With the organization's increasing emphasis on its long-term Fellow program as well as

the Teacher Support program, Niu Huang felt the need for ZY Project to build a physical

presence in Hunan as an organization. Having an office space closer to the organization's

partner schools also allows the organization to build closer relationships among the

partner schools. For instance, in 2016, ZY Project started to organize teacher training and

conversation forums in the regional office, where teachers and ZY Fellows were invited

to exchange their ideas about the work they were doing with ZY Project. The concluding

forums also took place in another building close to its Changsha office. According to Niu

Huang, this would also defray the operational cost as well: rather than buying bullet train

or overnight train tickets from Beijing to Changsha that would cost about $50 to $100

each way, from Changsha, staffs would only need to spend $10 to $20 for bus tickets to ZY Project's partner schools. With an office in Changsha, ZY Project anticipates to involve more university students in nearby provinces.

The People: The Diversification of the Volunteer Body

Since the organization's move from Boston to Beijing and then to Hunan, the composition of volunteers has been greatly diversified. In the early years, due to ZY Project's foreign location and its limited reach to a larger audience, the majority of volunteers in the early days of the organization were recruited from the student networks of the founders and early members and their acquaintances. In terms of education, these volunteers were mostly undergraduate students in North American elite universities or liberal art colleges. However, starting from 2011, the volunteer demography has greatly expanded. This change gets to be mostly expressed in the process of placing volunteers to teams.

After finishing the recruitment process, one of the major task of the Department of Program Operation is to allocate the selected applicants to different volunteer teams. To elicit preferences of the volunteers, the Department first sends out a questionnaire that contains basic information about the field-sites and partner schools, such as the location, history of partnership with ZY Project, as well as the special skills needed. Then, based on the volunteers' first three choices, their application materials and interview performances, the needs of each site (such as special skill requirements and the number of volunteers needed), the Department starts to allocate volunteers so that they are able to work as a team. The staff also take special note in placing volunteers of different profiles

equally to each field site. As the most experienced staff in the organization, Niu Huang

usually gives a final look at the assembled list before sending it out. He also takes great

pride in talking to me and other volunteer alumni about the success and failures that came

out of this endeavor. One day, when he was talking to an old ZY Project friend during the

concluding ceremony, he described to me his views on the profiles of the volunteers.

> We have four kinds of people. The first group consists of those who are studying
> abroad. These are ZY Projects in the traditional sense. Now we have about one
> fourth of these among the volunteers. Then we have those in good Chinese
> universities. These days we have more and more [volunteers] in this group. Then
> we have some volunteers with special backgrounds: for instance, those who were
> born in under-developed areas and got into universities in China. Lastly, we have
> more and more who were previously ZY Project students.

As he said this, he joked to me that he had already told me "how you are [I am]

going to write your dissertation." It is noticeable how the organization differentiated the

volunteers according to their educational backgrounds and gave special preferences to

those who did not go through the urban schooling systems. In the process of putting

volunteers into teams, the Department took great caution in terms of balancing these

different kinds of people: on the condition of meeting the volunteers' preferred choices,

each team must include people from each category. The overall rationale is to prevent the

team from being unable to work together as a team or from being unable to carry out the

various projects in the official and self-proposed curriculum. The placement assignments

are announced via the WeChat group before the pre-field orientation.

Depending on the number of the local student participants, each team is composed

of ten to fifteen volunteers. Since the volunteers mostly operate on themselves without

direct supervision from staff or local teachers, each team has two team leaders, one

overseeing the program's overall operation and the other responsible for inspection on

quality of teaching. As for the selection process of the team leaders, volunteers fill out a questionnaire to indicate their willingness and strengths they could bring to the team leadership. The team leader assignments are announced during the orientation. In a sense, the localization of ZY Project has resulted in greater participation of university students from a wide range of backgrounds, including elite and non-elite university students in China, as well as former students who had undergone through its own programs.

A review of ZY Project's history reveals its several shifts: from a student organization to a full-fledged NGO, from foreign-based to domestic-based, and from organizing only summer teaching programs to long-term programs and programs geared toward a broader audience in the state education system. The localization of ZY Project has resulted in the diversification of the volunteer body as well as its educational model.

The Summer Volunteer Program of *Zhiyou* Project

Before detailing the changes in ZY Project's volunteer composition and its model of education, I first spare a few words on the basics of its summer volunteer program. As ZY Project's oldest and the most cherished program, the summer program is "the most well-conceptualized and developed one" run by the organization. Originally conceived in 2007, these short-term programs last two to three weeks, placing volunteers to teach in rural county level high schools. The summer program usually takes place in July and August, when volunteers and students are on summer breaks. Taken from the Chinese characters of ZY Project, the title of summer program is translated as "a program that brings together sincere friends and accompany each other in the summer." In 2015, over a

hundred volunteers were placed in seven high schools in Hunan, Guangxi, and Guizhou Provinces.

Although the summer program officially starts in late July, the volunteers are brought together via online training and pre-field orientation in late April. In order to prepare the volunteers for the summer program, starting from 2014, ZY Project provides six weeks of online training that introduces the following aspects: 1) the rural-urban gap in education; 2) the history of volunteerism and non-profit organizations in China; 3) Project-based Learning as ZY Project's educational model. Volunteers are supposed to read online materials and complete tasks as required in each section before the deadline. Adding to the online materials are Skype meetings based on the pre-arranged mentors from ZY Project. These meetings are designed to facilitate volunteer's independent seminar designs.

Then, the volunteers convene in Beijing for a week-long orientation, during which ZY Project organizes pedagogy workshops, book reading sessions, mock teaching sessions, and guest lectures. Materials are distributed to the volunteers during the orientation. These materials include a few curriculum handbooks, T-shirts for the volunteers and the local students, as well as necessary equipment to be used in the program. After the pre-field orientations, volunteers are dispersed to respective field-sites for the summer program. Lastly, the volunteers are reconvened in ZY Project's Changsha office for a concluding forum, where volunteers share their experiences in the summer program.

As the program is entirely voluntary, ZY Project does not cover the cost of its program. The partner high schools provide student dormitories for the volunteers, and

offer free meals in the school cafeteria. Other personal costs are the responsibility of the volunteers. Such costs would include eating out with students, buying personal necessities and gifts for the students, and the transportation fee to and from the field-site. These costs usually yield to about 1500 RMB (about $250). The cost varies depending on the means of transportation. However, the organization does allocate 1000 RMB printing and activity fee per team. Distributed to the logistic team leader prior to their arrival to the field-sites, the money is for the volunteers to purchase materials and supplies for activities with the students.

In terms of scheduling, the organization provides a suggested timetable to each team of volunteers, who can then adjust the table to fit the needs of the team and the progress of student learning. The timetable includes a few preparation days, in which the volunteers get ready for teaching, and a day for program conclusion. A casual look at a suggested timetable shows how packed it is with activities that run from 8am to 9pm, on a day-to-day basis: below is a typical timetable of the summer program from 2016. Upon seeing the schedule, those who are not familiar with ZY Project always wonder about the content of the components, and wonder why the timetable is packed in such a way, and what the purposes for each module are. In the following section, I explain the different modules. With the words of the alumni, I show that this schedule is also a result of the organization's attempt to localize its model of education.

Week 1	7.16	7.17	7.18	7.19	7.20	7.21	7.22
8:00-8:30	Opening ceremony and Challenge Game 1	PEER Homeroom					Break
8:30-9:15		Seminar 1	Core Ability 3	Seminar 2	Core Ability 5	Seminar 3	
9:20-10:05							
10:20-11:05			Core Ability 4		Core Ability 6		
11:10-11:55		TED Talk		TED Talk		TED Talk	
11:55-1:30		Lunch Break					
1:30-5:30	Core Ability 1&2 + Seminar Couse Selection	CEP 1	Challenge Game 2	CEP 2	CEP 3	Challenge Game 3	
6:40-8:30		Study Hall (or flexible time)					
8:30-9:30		PEER Homeroom					
Week 2	7.23	7.24	7.25	7.26	7.27	7.28	7.29
8:00-8:30	PEER Homeroom						
8:30-9:15	Core Ability 7	Core Ability 9	Seminar 5	Core Ability 11	Core Ability 13	Seminar 6	Break
9:20-10:05							
10:20-11:05	Core Ability 8	Core Ability 10		Core Ability 12	Core Ability 14		
11:10-11:55			TED Talk			TED Talk	
11:55-1:30	Lunch Break						
1:30-5:30	CEP 4	CEP 5	Challenge Game 4	CEP 6	CEP 7	Challenge Game 5	
6:40-8:30	Seminar 4	Study Hall (or flexible time)					
8:30-9:30	PEER Homeroom						
Week 3	7.3	7.31	8.1	8.2	8.3	8.4	8.5
8:00-8:30	PEER Homeroom						
8:30-9:15	Seminar 7	Core Ability 15	Seminar 8	CEP 8	Core Ability 17	CEP and Final Presentation Preparation	Volunteers' Reflection and Break
9:20-10:05							
10:20-11:05		Core Ability 16			Core Ability 18		
11:10-11:55	TED Talk		TED Talk				
11:55-1:30	Lunch Break						
1:30-5:30	CEP 9	CEP 10	Challenge Game 6	CEP 11	CEP 12	Presentations and Concluding Ceremony	
6:40-8:30	Study Hall (or flexible time)						
8:30-9:30	PEER Homeroom						
	8.6	8.7					
	Volunteers' Reflection and Break	Concluding Ceremony for all teams					

Note: In morning class sessions, class breaks are scheduled in the following three time intervals: 9:15-9:20, 10:05-10:20, 11:05-11:10. Note that there's a difference between shorter and longer breaks.

Chart 1: Schedule of ZY Project's Summer Volunteer Program

From Rural-Oriented Liberal Arts Education to Project-Based Learning:

The "PBL-ization" of ZY Project's Original Educational Model

The vision of ZY Project's education dates back to the founders' own schooling experience and the image of rural education in their minds. As the co-founders of ZY Project went to elite undergraduate institutions in the U.S., they were beneficiaries of American liberal arts education. However, as I demonstrate below, the localization process of this organization has prompted it to consciously alter the original educational model so as to cater to the needs of the schools and the teachers, as well as the organization's survival in the Chinese NGO market. The staff members refer to this as the "PBL-ization" of the rural-oriented liberal arts education.

The Original Components: Seminars, Experience Sharing Sessions, and Extra-curricular Activities

The seminars: liberal arts education

A key module in ZY Project's summer program is its long-cherished seminars, proposed and taught by the volunteers themselves. Having existed since the founding of the organization, this module is the highlight of ZY Project's programs, especially from the perspectives of the volunteers. In my conversations with the volunteers during the concluding forums, most volunteers cite the seminars as the top reason attracting them to come back to the organization again in subsequent summers. Some also told me that the chance of proposing, developing, and teaching their own seminars is part of what allures them to volunteer in ZY Project, rather than in other similar summer programs. It is

worth special mentioning that in the Chinese language there is no word for or direct equivalent of the English word "seminar": ZY Project initially used the English term "seminar" to label this module, and in later years coined a descriptive Chinese phrase, *xiao xing yan tao ke* (小型研讨课, literally translated as "small research and discussion classes"), to better cater to the Chinese-speaking audience.

The website introduces the Seminars this way: "from Western liberal art classics to contemporary history of science, from creative computer programming to feminist literature, students [of the Seminars] are to be exposed to the areas that they had never known before. Broadening their horizons, students are to be inspired by the interactions and discussions between the teachers and the students. In this way, students could learn from the reading materials and conversations, becoming proactive learners that are able to reason critically."

The rationales for the Seminars are two-fold, one about the content and the other one about pedagogy. Firstly, the Seminar provides extra-curricular activities and out-of-school learning opportunities for rural students that ZY Project serves. The *suzhi* education reform in China continues to further marginalize high school students with its urban-centeredness. As a result, students in rural schools are deprived of the extra-curricular activities and out-of-school learning opportunities that should have been provided in regular schooling periods. They are also confined to knowledge included in the textbooks related to the National University Entrance Exam. Based on my conversations with students currently enrolling in ZY Project's partner schools, the students usually do not have a clear idea about the various majors to be chosen in college

education. Most of them think within the science vs. arts dichotomy[12] and can only think about economics, finance, and journalism as disciplines outside of what they had known in regular classrooms. What exacerbates the situation is that students are taught to think for the "correct answer" due to pressures from exams. Through the self-proposed seminars, ZY Project hopes to provide a wide gamut of content materials so that students can be exposed to content knowledge outside of their everyday classroom.

Moreover, inspired by the model of courses volunteers take in their undergraduate institutions, the Seminars are ideally discussion-based lessons, in which volunteers lead students into classroom discussions. ZY Project asks its volunteers to include small and large group discussions so that students can experience student-centered classes. The official Seminar guide document explicitly states that small and large group discussions should "take up the majority of time" in the seminar classes. The document also lists a "small teacher" activity, in which students are encouraged to take turn as teachers and to teach in classes.

Hence, the Seminar model also allows for "more choices and independence on the part of the students." With the flexibility of this module, each volunteer can select a topic of their own, develop and write learning goals and activities prior to the summer program, and deliver the course in the summer program. In turn, in a summer program, multiple Seminars are offered and students have the opportunities to choose from the

---

[12] In Chinese high schools, students choose between the science track and the arts track to be tested in NUEE. Those who enroll in the science track take classes in physics, chemistry, and biology, while the arts students take classes in politics, history, and geography.

Seminar offerings at the beginning of the program. They can petition to the volunteers to switch to other ones if they find the seminar not appealing after the first session.

Contents of the seminars cover a wide range of topics, ranging from philosophy, architecture, finance, chemistry, classical and popular music, etc. Most of the volunteers propose their topics due to their own familiarities and personal interests. Some model their seminars from courses they have taken in college, while some pick a topic with which they have deep personal connections. Below is a list of seminars that were offered and taught in the 2016 summer program.

Table 1: ZY Project's Seminar Titles in Summer 2016

Discipline(s)	Topics (Course Title)
Literature	A general introduction to Shakespeare
	Using non-fictional writing to document everyday life
	Rollover! English
	Critical analysis of English poetry
	Creating a children's literature book by yourself
	Replying the suffering *Odysseus*
	Coming home and passing by: Analyzing and composing Chinese and English poetry
	Understanding ourselves through literature and writing about growing up
	Creating my picture book and bring the world a hint of beauty

Arts	Western musical and the society (taught bilingually in English and Chinese)
	The Peach Blossom Land: A practical guide to modern stage play
	Stage play: *Music of the Opera*
	Arts beyond atheistic
	Reasons for debating: An introduction to Chinese debate
	Lessons for Mandarin
	"Who am I?" Using analytical reading and creative media to understand ourselves
	Confucius and Socrates
	The intriguing moral dilemmas
	Ethics and morality in East and West philosophy
	Reasons to help the others: A seminar on moral philosophy
	An introduction to political philosophy in the Eastern and Western philosophies
	An introduction to Renaissance Italy
Sociology and anthropology	Current status quo of inequality in China
	Exploring culture and society
	Female social and living status quo in contemporary Chinese society
	Gender, literature, and public opinion
	LGBT's current rights and status quo in China

	LGBT's ways of thinking and the social influences
	The long road to female rights protection
	The local construction of Chinese female culture
	Man and Female: Meandering on gender
	On love
Psychology and education	Introduction to psychology
	Introduction to educational psychology
	Introduction to psychological theories
	How do we know about the world
	How to fall in love with a course: Changes in secondary level curricula design
	On *Suzhi*
Finance, management and economics	Getting to know business models
	How to make right decisions under different circumstances?
	How to manage my pocket money?
	My road to creating a business
	Future company designer
	Minicompany: conceptualizing a business proposal from start to the end
	Understanding the origin of economic inequality
	Understanding how to use the library
Science, technology, and design	PC-Logo The beauty of writing computer programming
	Introduction to Python's Applications

	Some exciting and toughing moments in Science
	A history of mathematics
	Math and everyday life
	My dream house: An introduction to architecture
	Designing comfortable public spaces
Media, photography, and videography	Welcoming new social media to our lives
	Positive internet psychology
	Foundations of Television videography
	Development and productions of Chinese and foreign movies
	A history to media
	An introduction to classic advertisements
	Art and photography in travel

Here, it should be noted that the 2016 seminar topics included a few category that were not "typical" in the eyes of some ZY Project alumni. According to Sung, who joined ZY Project in its early days and returned as a volunteer in 2016, commented (in contempt) that seminars that fall into the categories of "Finance and Economics," "Science, Technology and Design," and "Media, Photography, and Videography" were seen as seminar in a "non-traditional way." Yaole Shen, an alumnus who was a volunteer in 2013, told me that the STEM seminars were not what he saw a few years ago.

The original supporting modules: TED Talk and Zhiyou Homeroom

In addition to the Seminars, the summer program includes three supporting modules. These are the TED Talk (previously termed as "Dialogues on Experiences"), the Challenge Games, and *Zhiyou* Homeroom. In the TED Talk module, volunteers are asked to prepare a ten- to fifteen-minute talk to deliver to the rural students. ZY Project does not provide clear instructions on the purposes and formats of this module. During one of the programs for which I helped out as a local contact, the organization asked me to come up with guides on TED Talk. As I asked Niu Huang what kind of document is appropriate, he answered that materials on the internet would suffice. Hence, the guides volunteers receive were the official TEDx speaker guide and another article published on the Huffington Post on presentation.

The *Zhiyou* Homeroom is the main activity and grouping unit in the program. The Homeroom is usually composed of two to three volunteers and ten to twelve students. Each morning and evening, students and volunteers meet with the Homeroom group, to warm up and get ready for the rest of the day and to conclude the day with reflections. Each Homeroom also has a team name that the group comes up with at the beginning of the program, and the name is referred to throughout the duration of the program. The Homeroom members also work as a group in the Challenge Games, where the volunteers come up with educational team activities. Most of these team challenge activities center on developing students' communication skills and team work spirits. The organization distributes the guidelines and sample activities for Homeroom and Challenge Game in the form of a handbook during its pre-field orientation.

Bringing the "Rural-Orientation" into Liberal Arts Education

A major change in ZY Project's recent curriculum module is the addition and subsequent systematization of the Community Exploration Project. Growing out from the community engagement activities that ZY Project developed since early on in its history (2009 and 2010), this project gets to be featured in Niu Huang's talks about the organization on various NGO gatherings. Borrowing the service-learning model from the United States, the project aims to lead students to conduct independent or group research on a question or an issue in the local community. The CEP curriculum models on the independent community projects ZY Project developed in its early years. In each project, two to three volunteers lead a group of five to seven students and work together for the project.

ZY Project's interns and part-time workers the Department of Curriculum Development wrote these two modules. Prepared before the summer program, these materials are printed out as Handbooks, which are distributed during the pre-field orientations. In the summer program, the volunteers teach according to the Handbook and adjust the materials according to the needs of the students.

What CEP symbolizes is ZY Project's explicit emphasis on the students' cultural background and its emphases in teaching students values such as civic engagement and participation. As it requires students to develop a research project about a place of their choices, the goal of CEP is to spark the student's interests in the "local knowledge" that they does not get a chance to explore. Seeing the suffocating and alienating everyday schooling environment of the students, ZY Project hopes that these projects could bring the students out from the everyday schools, and at least pay attention to the history,

tradition, and the everyday life of the place they live in. Niu Huang explicates this ideal

in a public speech on a Forum that convenes education-related NGOs in China:

> … Nowadays, high school students in ZY Project's field-sites are mostly from a rural background. That is, they have already moved from the villages or nearby towns to the capital of that county. They have been detached from their roots and have lost the appreciation to their hometown and culture. They also don't have a sense of belonging to their roots. This displacement in education contributes to the rural vs. urban dualism embedded in the modern Chinese discourse. Also, students haven't received education in high quality, so they would not be able to compete with students who graduated from high schools in urban areas. Therefore, although ZY Project's students are not "impoverished" in the traditional sense, they have not been exposed to the "cultures of their hometown."

> …when he (the rural high school student) leaves X town [his hometown] and matriculate in his university, how could he know how to describe where he comes from, and what his cultural identity is? If he has been detached from the community where he grew up and has been sitting homogenizing classes, it is pretty hard for him to understand who he himself is. Without such an understanding, how could he know who he is as a person?

In the process of developing the CEP curriculum, the interns and part-time workers have

referenced similar community-building projects that are used in public schools in the

U.S.. In ZY Project's office, I constantly heard them use online-accessible lesson plans

and curriculum guides as reference materials; they also read the translated versions of

service-learning curriculum guidebooks together, in order to find inspirations for the CEP

curriculum. They then attempted to adapt these materials into the local context.

Another feature of the CEP curriculum is its emphases on the fluidity of the

meaning of "culture." On one occasion, Niu Huang explicates his understandings about

the relationship between rurality and ZY Project's field-site:

> In my mind, the discussions on Linru have to be related to the Ming Dynasty, when more than ten ethnic minority groups resided in the county. As a result, Linru's culture is quite unique and is greatly influenced by the Miao/Hmong ethnic minorities. It is an "earthy" place: from the county center, one only needs to walk for 10 minutes to step on a random village to see the expressions of such local cultures. These are not those ethnic dances performed on TV; rather, one

could see sacrificial rituals, local farming songs, the story of Yang Tianbao, celebration ceremonies of traditional festivals, the old Nuoxi drama for apotropaic invocation in everyday lives. These traditions are still alive and vibrant.

…this county was also a place for meshing the rural and the urban. Located in the county are government offices, markets, schools, Confucian temples, stilted houses, architectures, Buddhist temples, and the Flying Mountain Temple. These are the local culture that needs to be revived. … Yet these are alien to our high school students.

What can be seen from Niu Huang's quote is his emphases on history, religion, and the culture embedded in history. This is, in part, due to Niu Huang's educational history: he identifies himself as a historian specializing in East Asia. He was always the one who talked about the importance of the county gazetteers and philosophical texts in ZY Project's office. Due to such efforts, the CEP curriculum included oral history, ethnographic observation and interview examples and activities. Examples include asking students to trace a mailperson's delivery day in order to understand the ecology of the county's traffic map, interviewing plaza dancers so as to understand how the elders see the activity themselves, etc.

In a word, the addition of the CEP project is an example of ZY Project's attempt to consciously adapt its educational model to the local county context. According to Ye Chun, one of the authors who wrote the first CEP curriculum, the idea of bringing the students out from the classrooms to experience the local community originated from the very common Social Studies lessons popular in high schools in the U.S.. Departing from the original educational approach in the early days of ZY Project that primarily focused on liberal arts materials, the CEP project brings local knowledge into its curriculum. This is part of the localization of ZY Project's curriculum.

Becoming Skill- and Outcome-Oriented: The "PBL-ization" of the Liberal Arts and Local Knowledge Education in 2015

Embracing a skill-based discourse

What followed after the addition of the CEP project was the adoption of a skill-based and outcome-based discourse. Skill-building activities, originally embedded in the CEP project and the Seminar courses, got detached from the content, and became pure modules aimed at skill building. For example, Niu Huang asked me to write a lesson plan on interview skills as a part of the CEP project, and the lesson plan later became a stand-alone short course. A Core Ability lesson series were then developed and implemented in the summer programs. Written in 2014, the Core Ability series includes individual lesson plans that aim to cultivate the students' key skills, identified by the organization based on the observation and experience of previous volunteers. These key skills include critical thinking, interpersonal communication, public speaking and presentation skills, study skills (tips for note-taking, etc.). Other examples include survey design, presentation skills, and public speaking. More recently, technology-related skills has become ZY Project's latest development focus. Newly written and introduced activities include those that develop photo and video shooting and editing skills, skills to use computer software such as Adobe Photoshop and InDesign, and skill to search on the internet.

Becoming outcome-based: The "PBL-ization" of the original ideal

The year 2015 marked ZY Project's official embrace of the Project-Based Learning (PBL) model, which would underpin all across its curriculum materials. According to the Director of Curriculum Development, PBL is "all-encompassing and

adaptable to all the modules." At the time when ZY Project first decided to implement

PBL as its overarching organizing principle of the curriculum, Niu Huang commented

that the category PBL is capacious and flexible, and more importantly, "not a lot of other

organizations that I [he] know about are able to develop curriculum using this model."

Since PBL is rooted in constructivist pedagogy and has a wealth of scholarly literatures

behind it, since summer 2015, the Director of Curriculum Development has been busy

reading and taking notes from *Understanding by Design*, the golden guidebook used in

schools of education in the United States. Recommended by Niu Huang, who consulted

his friends studying in the field of education in the U.S., *Understanding by Design* and

other popular guides on PBL such as bie.org and lynda.com were the major reference

materials for the Department to conceptualize and develop the organization's official

curricula and a guide for the volunteers to learn about PBL.

Therefore, from 2015 onward, the volunteers are asked to adapt the Seminar into

the PBL model and to lead students to put together a "project" towards the end of the

program. These projects are to be presented to the entire program participants, so that

those who did not enroll in the seminar are able to see what the students have been

working on throughout the duration of the program.

Incorporating PBL into the Community Exploration Project, the curriculum now

includes several phases and milestones that volunteers and students should achieve

together. These include 1) completing a "task card," a sample of a CEP project that aims

to inspire students to take up subsequent projects, and presenting what students have

accomplished in the tasks; 2) presenting a "mid-term" report at the mid-point of the

program so that teams know about what others have been working on and offer feedbacks

and critiques to one another; 3) writing a research report that grows out from the project, citing reference materials and interview and survey materials; 4) putting together a final presentation on the process and final product of the project, preferably using visual/multimedia illustrations. To guide the volunteers through the process of leading this project, the curriculum also includes numerous tables and forms for the volunteers and the students to complete, such as interview preparation form, post-interview reflection form, team management form, project question form, etc.

Moreover, the Department of Curriculum Development also came up with variants of the CEP curriculum. These are the Digital Storytelling (DST) project and the Community Newsroom Project (CNP). Compared to the original turn to rural and local knowledge in the CEP, the major difference between these variants and additions and the earlier CEP is that the students are now required to come up with a "product" from these projects. For instance, the DST curriculum asks each small team to submit a video clip with the local story they would narrate, while the CNP curriculum requires the entire volunteer team to put together a printable magazine. The "outcomes," including student presentations, video clips, and printable magazines, are to be submitted not only to the volunteers but also to the organization for archival and publicity purposes.

It was the liberal-arts focus, the turn to rural and local knowledge, and a desire to "showcase" its outcome that form the hectic schedule of the summer volunteer program. To the staff members, particularly Niu Huang, these elements are integral to the whole: taking out any of these elements would be a loss for them in achieving their purposes. This insistence on the totality of the elements becomes evident when considering the

program planning meetings and the outcomes. Well-aware of the program's complexity, Niu Huang convened program planning meetings each summer for the purpose of "revamping and simplifying the program." Yet, as much as they want to "rethink and reconstruct" the summer program, at the end of these meetings, they would always come back to the same conclusion, writing a somewhat similar program schedule that includes the Seminars, the CEP projects, as well as the modules that could produce materials for publicity purposes. In other words, the attempts to localize the overseas-educated Chinese student organization into a Chinese-based NGO has given rise to an ideal of the organization, that is, to become a locally-based and rooted organization with a global mindset.

Coda: Localization and the Formation of an Ideal

In this chapter, I have recounted the history of ZY Project and shown the changes that localization has brought to it. From an intercollegiate, online community to a registered NGO in China, ZY Project has consciously adapted itself into the Chinese legal, social, and educational context. It has diversified its program provision and shifted its focus from the summer program to the long-term program and the supporting program. It has also began to selectively and strategically build partnerships with Chinese schools and other Chinese NGOs. Through these efforts, ZY Project hopes to transform itself from a student organization made up of undergraduate students from elite institutions to an NGO that has a growing presence among Chinese youths and the growing Chinese NGO field. Using the word of Niu Huang, this is for ZY Project to be "rooted in the local reality" (*zhagen xiangtu,* 扎根乡土).

96

Two changes need to be highlighted in the localization processes, one about its people and the other about its educational model. Regarding the composition of the volunteers, ZY Project is now composed of not only youths that were educated in the global North, but also, those who are educated in China and of non-urban background. The diversification of its volunteer body is critical in understanding the ethical implication of volunteer practices, and the privileged nature of such practices. Secondly, the localization process has also altered the educational model. In order to integrate ZY Project's education to the Chinese school landscape, it has firstly stressed on a rural element and then adapted to a skill-oriented discourse. For these purposes, it adopted PBL as its guiding model and attempted to retain its original Seminar focus. This has given rise to a complicated and busy program schedule.

What is embedded in the localization process, then, is the formation of an ideal that combines the West and China—a cosmopolitan one. Not letting go of its Western origin and grappling with Chinese reality at the same time, the organization has consciously made changes to itself on all fronts so as to retain the Western origin while also becoming more Chinese. To what extent and how does this ideal changes the behaviors and experiences of the volunteers? As what I show in the following chapter, in the realm of the person, this cosmopolitan ideal has been given a Chinese name, a *jie di qi* person, meaning someone who is "connected to the soil."

Chapter 5: Going "Down" to the Field-sites: Constructing a Malleable Self

Similar to the organization's traveling trajectory, its volunteers also travel to the rural place themselves. However, throughout my time in the field, Niu Huang, as well as many staff members and volunteer alumni have expressed to me explicitly that not all youths should be volunteering, or even are suitable to work as volunteers. In popular reflection pieces on short-term volunteer programs, commentators write about the qualities that youths should possess in order to be a "qualified volunteer." In the words of my informants, such qualities could be summarized by the term *jie di qi* (接地气), literally translated as "to be connected to the soil." Moreover, my informants narrative their journey as "going down to the project site" (*xia xiangmudian,* 下项目点), and speak about their desire of becoming a volunteer as a chance to become a person who is connected to the soil.

As the term *jie di qi* is significant in the everyday conversation of the staff and the volunteers, as well as the practice of the volunteers, I explicate the quality of *jie di qi* using narratives of the volunteers. I show that in practice, to become *jie di qi* is to consciously alter the self to become a malleable person: a person who is able to quickly adapt him/herself to the circumstances that he or she is thrown into, particularly in the rural countryside, which are deemed as the internal Other. I also show that the practices of *jie di qi* have given rise to a new understanding of cosmopolitan-ness that encompasses

the rural and the foreign, two categories that are significant in the Chinese moral geography. Following existing scholarship on development and self-making (as reviewed in Chapter 2), I demonstrate that overseas-educated Chinese students come to the rural countryside in the search for an authentic way of living and being.

"Going *Down* to the Field-sites": A Chinese Moral Geography

I start with an explanation of the phrase "going down to the field-sites," which is frequently mentioned during the orientations and in the narratives of the volunteers. Instead of saying going to the countryside, most of the youths who enroll in foreign universities have referred to the county areas as going "down." As much as the term sounds derogatory, the rural places as somewhere down below is deeply rooted in the Chinese cosmology, as explained by Fei Xiaotong, the renowned anthropologist of China.

In his most well-known book, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (1992)*,* Fei lays out a theory about the organizing principle of the Chinese society. In particular, he explains the significance of the soil in rural people's life. As the rural Chinese society was largely an agricultural one, the land is intertwined in the people's livelihood. In Fei's words, the farmers were always waiting for their crops to mature, and they seem to "have planted half of their own bodies into the soil" (p. 38). Moreover, in rural areas, the god most represented in the shrines is *Tudi Shen* (土地神, literally translated as "the god of the earth"), also the god closest to human nature. Those whose livelihood depends on pastoralism and industry live an unsettled life, while the majority of Chinese peasants are attached to the soil (Fei, 1992). According to Fei, who was

witnessing the beginning of the modernizing transitional period of China, the significance of rootedness is key to understanding the foundation of Chinese society.

The significance of the soil also has implications on the ways in which people form communities in China. Because of the significance of the soil on which one must work, village became the basic unit of Chinese society (Fei, 1992). Each village is composed of several families, who work together on nearby land. Due to each family's attachment to the soil, the Chinese villages exist in isolation from one another, and confine their scope of activities within a limited geographical area. Later anthropologists build upon this geographical proximity of the Chinese rural society and theorize the differential modes of association as the Chinese *guanxi* network, which emphasizes gift-giving and business-making in rural and urban China alike (Yan, 2003; Osburg, 2013).

Yet the modernizing influence has not only impacted the economic condition of the Chinese society. A more significant influence lies in the transformation of the Chinese moral landscape. Fei was astute to point out that the emerging division between countryside and the city was a moral one: "modern people denigrate everything rural" (p. 44), and that the way modern people call country people as "soiled" (*tuqi*) was disrespectful. In *Xiangtu Zhongguo Yu Xiangtu Chongjian* , Fei's later publication, he observes that the growing importation of foreign goods in coastal cities has given rise to two kinds of cities, the inland urban cities and the coastal metropolitan cities that are more subject to Western influence (1993). Thus, a Chinese moral geography gradually emerged: places closer to the soil—the countryside—are deemed backward and undeveloped, while places closer to the foreign (i.e. West) are seen as more developed. Contemporary anthropologist Fong (2011) extends this moral geography to a global

scale, as Chinese citizens move from urban cities in China to *waiguo* (foreign countries) to pursue first world citizenship, which carries higher moral weight. Note that here, most of the Chinese citizens do not differentiate between the geographical locations of the "foreign" places in this category (such as Japan vs. the United States vs. Australia) and that a "foreign place" denotes an advanced status in terms of culture, society, and economy, implicitly similar to a developmentalist notion of the "civilizational ladder."

Such a Chinese moral geography is directly related to the way volunteers refer to the county-level high schools where they would work. Having lived in foreign countries that are "up high," the volunteers automatically see themselves as moving "down" to places that are developmentally backward. It is the *di qi* (the earthiness) that they are searching for. The question then becomes, why do the volunteers *want to* become an "earthy" person, when the soil is something backward and should be kept away from? In other words, why is "earthiness" desirable in the mind of contemporary Chinese youths?

The Lure of the Rural

To understand the attractiveness of the rural, I turn to the volunteers' narratives on their motivations of going "down" to the rural vis-à-vis their lives outside the program. As I show below, in their eyes, the earthiness of the rural was particularly attractive due to their everyday life outside of China.

To see the "real China"

One of the most frequently cited reasons that attracts the volunteers to the rural is to see the "real China." This reason is most frequently invoked by those who have been

studying abroad. Dongpeng, who majors in environmental policy and cinema studies,

talks about how he sees rural China when he was asking a volunteer alumnus about the

value of ZY Project's summer program:

> In my education abroad, I have read a lot of theories, such as theories about
> environmental protection and interpretations about societal problems in China. I
> have learned that a lot of these problems are rooted in rural China, which is also
> the key to solving these problems. Before I graduate, I hope to go to the rural
> places just to see the real China. At least, I think I need to go there in person.

As most of the volunteers have taken classes that discuss social problems in the U.S. and

on a global scale, they have also been using these ideas to reflect on their home country.

Moreover, the volunteers are also avid users of social media platforms such as Weibo and

WeChat, where people can post short statements on incidents and sometimes in-depth

analyses about social issues in China. They read and repost these messages, and are

particularly cynical when the content of the message is deleted due to the increasingly

severe media surveillance by the state. Some of the most hotly discussed problems in

China are gender inequality, environmental degradation, and LGBTQ oppression. The

volunteers are often scathing critics about the "backwardness" and the loss of morality in

China (for example, Fong, 2004, 2011) in comparison to the country where they have

lived in. Shuwen spoke about this in length.

> [Wanting to volunteer] …relates to my first-year experience in the U.S. I grew up
> in Nanning, Guangxi, and went to high school there. I found that I was educated
> in a "backward" way: I felt that the only purpose of studying was for the National
> University Entrance Exams. But after I came to America and listened to their
> everyday conversations, I felt that they were very concerned about social and
> political issues, those issues related to the country… I didn't understand this at all
> at first. For example, I took a class entitled "early childhood education in social
> context," in which the teacher asked us to watch Disney cartoons, stuff that were
> made for children. She asked us to find things that could potentially relate to

children's body-heart development (*shen xin fa zhan,* 身心发展). My classmates were able to see stereotypical accounts about Asians or African Americans, and some cultural messages. At first I thought, they were simply *overthinking*… I mean, at first I felt like they were overthinking. But then I signed up for an Asian student group that supported Asian students. There was a talk that I remember in particular. It was about the fetishization of Asian females, and also the feminization of Asian males. I found my voice and how I could be part of the conversation.

Also, at that time, I was studying French, and the [November 2015 Paris] terrorist attack happened. I then knew that in France there were a lot of African immigrants, second generations, I think. From then on, I began to try to look at those who were marginalized in the society. I started to pay attention to immigration, discrimination, and so on.

I am a Han ethnic majority, and I won't feel discriminated. But then after I came to America, I paid more attention to China. I found out that although there were modern cities in China that looked like the U.S., there were other under-resourced places. So I guess, I would like to do this program because I want to experience these, and to tell them [what I have learned in the U.S.].

Shuwen relates her urges to volunteer to her cultural shock experience in America. As she grew up as a majority person in an urban city, she did not feel the inequality that might have been present in China. Therefore, the task of finding stereotypes did not make sense to her at first. However, due to the exposure to difference and critical reflections on difference, Shuwen gradually found herself in the conversations about equality and social justice. She realized herself to be an Asian person in the United States, then as an immigrant. Relating herself back to China, she found out her position as an ethnic Han person in China. In other words, without moving to the United States and feeling herself alienated in the study abroad journey, Shuwen would not have been able to find the rural place interesting, not to mention to travel there and volunteer.

Shuwen's narrative is representative across my informants. When asked about the motivations of volunteering in the rural area, a lot of them explicitly point out the unequal

distribution of educational resources and the implicit discrimination against the

marginalized groups in China. The lure of the rural is related to how youths themselves

are positioned in their own physical and moral geographies: the experience of living in a

foreign land and being exposed to discourses on equality is one of the reasons that have

made the rural attractive. The volunteers themselves also make a symbolic divide

between themselves and the rural people they would work with.

To do something different from their "normal life"

When asked to talk about their summer volunteer experiences, some of my

informants specifically reflected on how this work did not directly relate to their future

career. For instance, Shuwen also spoke about this issue:

> Of course I know that I need to find internships and so on. When I was planning for the summer, I looked at my roommate, who was a STEM major and had found on a paid internship in a major American investment company, and I told myself, well I should probably do that as well. It's good for finding a job after I get my Bachelor's degree. I mean, the internship is paid as well… It also pays for about some \$2,000 a month, which is enough for her to pay for rent and other things in the summer. However, I thought about what I could find [as a psychology major]: there were a lot of tutoring jobs but that was it. But I feel I shouldn't be confined by my major and should find something meaningful to do.

In the quote above, Shuwen compared her summer plan with another student who found a

paid internship in the United States. Compared to the paid internship, volunteering in ZY

Project means that she would need to leave the U.S., spend money on a plane ticket back

to China, and pay for the expenses related to ZY Project's program. She also alluded to

how this experience was not related to her undergraduate major, hence, her later career

advancement.

Some volunteers critiqued their fellow peers explicitly. In particular, they talked about other international students as "having too strong of a *gong li xin* (功利心, literally translated as "achievement-and-profit [driven] heart")," meaning that the other students always sought to maximize the use of summer time towards their professional future. Some said that they were particularly disappointed to hear about how the fellow classmates responded to the summer experience when they returned to America. Lingxin's words were representative here: "Oh they just said 'interesting,' while they asked a lot of questions to those who vacationed in some Caribbean island, or interned in major companies such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, etc. What I did in their eyes was so not important because it does not add anything on my résumé. Volunteering was *nothing* to them" [Emphasis original].

Why is something unrelated to career prospects desirable? How do the volunteers set themselves apart from the others who did not understand the value of the rural? A look at the culturally ideal model of Chinese citizens provides an answer. Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening Up policy in China, the Chinese state has been fervently subscribing to a developmentalist rationale in order to secure a place in the global economy. This has resulted in drastic changes in how Chinese individuals conceptualize education and the ideal kind of person as a result of education. From an individual embedded in the concentric *wu lun* circle, to a collective self (of the socialist period), and to a flexible, desiring and enterprising self (Fei, 1947; Rofel, 2007; Kipnis, 2011; Hoffman, 2010; Hansen, 2013; Yan, 2009), the embedded cultural model of ideal personhood has witnessed an individualizing trend. In particular, Yan (2013) theorizes that Chinese citizens exhibit a pattern of "striving" in response to the changing Chinese

economic and moral landscape. The Chinese individuals are "driven by the urge to succeed or the fear of failure or the combination of both" (p. 282). He further explains that the individuals must be "industrious, self-disciplined, calculating, and pragmatic" (p. 283) in order to succeed or avoid losing out.

The striving pattern has deep implications on education at both the state and the individual level. The Chinese government seeks to foster a creative and innovative workforce that can generate economic value and internalize the Party-State ideology; while for Chinese citizens, to strive for "moving ahead" in the imagined educational hierarchy has become a mandate. Here, "moving ahead" is related to two trajectories. Firstly, there is a "temporal sequence of advancing" (Hansen, 2015, p. 57) that most Chinese students conform to. This sequence of advancing is a culturally idealized, step-by-step arrangement of how a student is expected to go about advancing in the personal development scheme. Such an arrangement expects one to "attend preschool, primary school, middle school, and high school, all while doing extracurricular activities, sit for the National University Entrance Examination, go to university, study abroad, find an internship, (optional) become a member of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) and do the Civil Service Examination, obtain attractive employment" (p. 58). To move ahead in this trajectory is particularly important for middle-class children and parents due to their pursuits of *suzhi* (human quality), a value-coding scheme created by the Chinese government to categorize people on the discursive level (see Anagnost, 2004, Kipnis, 2011; Lou, 2011). Beneath this linear trajectory is a pragmatic understanding of education: in investing time, money, and efforts in education, one expects to accumulate

capital—whether in economic or symbolic terms—in the global market (see Fong, 2011; Thogersen, 2012).

This moving trajectory highlights how economic reform in China has set the society in a forward motion: individuals move for the purpose of getting ahead, while the state strives for the role of a global leader. The result, then, is a state of "restlessness" (Hansen, 2015) both collectively and individually.

Moreover, Chinese students move following the path of another physical moving trajectory. That is, one travels from the periphery to the center in the Chinese moral geography, which places different moral weight on places according to their level of development. For instance, a rural child moves from the village to township, and to county in the hope of securing a place in an urban city. Similarly, students born in urban cities move from China to *waiguo* (foreign countries) in pursuit of first world citizenship (Fong, 2011). The chart below shows the ideal moving trajectory of a Chinese student.
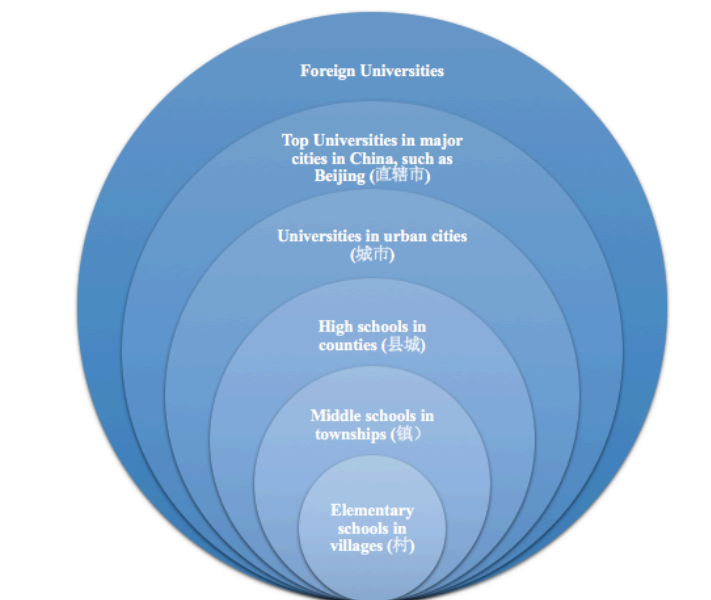
Chart 2: The imagined moving trajectory through education

Both Shuwen and Lingxin spoke about how summer volunteering was not directly related to their career advancement. It is clear from these remarks that volunteering does not fit into the normative, culturally idealized advancing trajectory. Compared to their peers, volunteering is a temporal and financial investment. Volunteering is a "break" from their "normal" life, in which they have been calculating for their major requirements and career future through course selections and student group participations. This is why the volunteer alumni always say that the time they spent in Changpu (or other fieldsites) was one of the few times that they "calmed down and focused on this one thing together" (c.f., Hansen, 2015). Describing the volunteering life as "abnormal," they allude to what Hansen (2015) points out as an inflection of an increasingly global temporal mode of striving, a kind of restlessness that "make them deaf from listening to the voices about themselves and finding a path of themselves." In other words, contrary to their Western counterparts, who sought volunteering projects as resume-padding practices (for example, Snee, 2014), my informants saw these activities as a break from the modern mandate of competing and getting ahead. The rural is a place where the volunteers look for a divergence from their "normal lives."

Empathy as an Important Quality to Become a *jie di qi* Person

Merely desiring the rural is not enough to become a *jie di qi* person. To do so, there are certain qualities that one must embody. A most important one is to be empathetic. The volunteers stress the importance to listen to the "locals" when talking about their teaching experience. When speaking about the program and the desired impact of their teaching, most of the youths say that they must listen to the needs and

cater to the needs of the teachers. They also desire to create projects that are sustainable

after they depart and to leave long-lasting influence to the students. Again, Shuwen

implicitly talks about this in her interview:

> To me, what I think is important is to listen from *their* perspectives. I have to
> listen to different people's voices, and to learn to be able to solve the same
> problem from different people's viewpoints. I need to understand how they see
> their communities and the country. If I want to contribute to equality and
> sustainable development in China, being empathetic is really important [Emphasis
> original].

What they highlighted, then, was the importance of being empathetic to the internal

Others. Staff members also see empathy as a pivotal value and a prerequisite in the

selection and training of volunteers. For instance, during the pre-field orientation, one

session specifically highlights the value of empathy, and uses a popular video to illustrate

how being empathic is able to connect different people together.

In order to be connected to the soil, one has to be observant and to be open to

surprise. As the volunteers are prepared for their projects of "doing good," either within

and outside the regular classrooms, they are constantly reminded that "everything will be

changed as soon as they get to the schools." When alumni came over to share previous

teaching and working experiences in the rural area, one similar story they shared was

how they had to adjust their lesson plans in order to meet the need of the students. "You

have to be prepared for unexpected answers in classes all the time," said Rao Hei during

his sharing session during the pre-field orientation. Recognizing that most of the

ambitious volunteers were educated in urban schools and have not been to rural schooling

systems before, Rao Hei told the volunteers to keep "an openness to surprise" in and

outside classrooms, as the original lesson plans of the volunteers were always written

based on stereotypical assumptions they had about high schools in rural areas in China. The orientation stressed on ways in which the volunteers should be observant to the local context, including the students and their everyday lives, so that in the program, they could "blur the line between the 'us' and the 'them'" and teach the materials more effectively.

What Is Proper and What Is Not: Attempts to Embody the *Jie Di Qi* Ideal

With the ideal of being connected to the soil, the volunteers had indeed "jumped out of their comfort zones" and consciously altered how they presented themselves throughout the programs. Moreover, my informants spoke about their various behaviors as "proper" for what they did in the rural area. Below, I show what the volunteers purposefully did when they were in the rural site in order to be connected to the soil.

To Travel with the Proper Means of Transportation

After the online training and the seven-day exhausting orientation in Beijing, more than one hundred volunteers were dispersed to their respective field sites in teams. For the volunteers, these journeys marked the beginning and the end of the volunteer program. Unsurprisingly, the journeys were treacherous yet exciting for most of the volunteers; however, the means of transportation could cause major debates between the staff and the volunteers.

Travel from Beijing to rural sites was long and complicated due to the system of transportation in China. Although the development of railway had connected most of the larger cities, the counties and townships where most volunteer programs took place were

only accessible through bus or mini bus rides. Therefore, the volunteers needed to transfer a few times before they could get to the place where they would spend the summer. What complicates the picture more was the two choices volunteers had for the train systems: they could either take the high-speed bullet train, faster and more convenient yet more costly, or the regular train system, which cost less but entailed a 16-hour overnight train journey. As June to August marked a peak season of railway travel in China, the volunteers needed to plan ahead and book tickets in advance. This responsibility fell on the shoulder of the logistic leader of each team, with some guidance from ZY Project staff. Interestingly, in the Changpu team, Zhen Shaolong, a sophomore sociology major in a liberal arts college in the U.S., almost had a fight with the staff about what tickets to buy for the team.

About a month prior to the program, Shaolong sent a message to the Changpu WeChat group, asking for the volunteers' preferences about travel arrangements. In particular, he asked the team whether they would prefer to take the high-speed bullet train or an overnight sleeper to Changsha (the capital city of Hunan Province). Since most of the volunteers did not have an idea about which option would fit their schedules the best, they left it to Shaolong's discretion. Growing up in a middle-class Beijing family, Shaolong opted for the high speed train: he told the group that the bullet train would take less time and was more comfortable. He reported back to the organization that the team would buy high-speed bullet train tickets instead of the overnight train tickets.

However, Kunkun, the then Director of Program Operation, disapproved of this decision. She managed to convince Shaolong that they should get tickets for the overnight hard bunk sleepers, because this option fitted better into the program's

111

schedule. Otherwise, the volunteers would have to arrive a day later than the scheduled

program starting date. Kunkun told me that Shaolong finally agreed to buy the overnight

train tickets after a few rounds of back and force. When I asked Kunkun about this

incident, Kunkun rolled her eyes and complaint, "for god's sake, sitting [on a bullet train]

for eight hours and then on a bus for another six hours is way much more tiresome. He's

just too *shao ye* (少爷, literally translated as "young masters") that he'd never

condescend to take the hard bunk sleeper (*tai weiqu ta le,* 太委屈他了)."

Kunkun disagreed with the decision of bullet train tickets for two reasons. First,

based on her years of experience, taking the overnight train was more comfortable and

also practically reasonable. Also, more importantly, in her mind, the summer program, as

a "project of doing good (做公益, literally translated as "doing public benefit")" should

not start with a costly, middle-class act, such as taking a high speed bullet train. Instead,

the volunteers should "learn to step outside their comfort zones" in this experience.

Just as Kunkun expected, most of the volunteers recounted the overnight train ride

as a major event in the program. Having been brought up in relatively well-off families,

they had not taken overnight trains before.[13] Excited by the train ride itself, they took

selfie pictures and posted WeChat updates on their timeline. Some even described the

sixteen-hour train ride as a journey that "takes [them] to the utopia (*li xiang guo,* 理想国

)." Moreover, the time they spent on the overnight train was a perfect time for the

volunteers to continue working on their lesson plans and plan for activities in the

---

[13] This also reflects a demographic change in the socioeconomic status of the Chinese
students studying abroad and of those recruited into the volunteer programs—The choice
between the two modes of trains was hardly an issue in the early days of the ZY Project,
when most volunteers would prefer the sleeper train and had previous experience with it.

program. To break the silence between the volunteers, who had only met for a few days, they also played popular group games such as Mafia or Truth or Dare. In a sense, the moment that the volunteers boarded on the train to the respective field sites, their "abnormal life" began.

For the volunteers, the rest of the journey was physically exhaustive. Carrying their luggage and the materials they had prepared for the students (including the program handbooks and the customized T-Shirts for 60-80 students), the volunteers had to be on the road for about twenty hours before they could get to Changpu. The journey to Changpu started out with excitement, laughter, and work, and ended up in silence: because of the train's delay, they missed the bus from Changsha to Changpu, and had to take a first bus and then switch to a minibus so that they could get to the county in time for the program. With the 95 °F degree weather, by the time they got to the county, everyone was exhausted by the suffocating heat, the ponderous luggage, and the bumpy mountain roads. Yet to go through this physical journey with the proper, local means of transportation was a must to begin the program; otherwise, just as what Kunkun commented, most of the volunteers considered flying or riding the high speed bullet train as inappropriate.

To Dress Properly

In addition, the volunteers were particularly careful with regard to how they dressed themselves in the field-site. Before going into the field, ZY Project staff would hold a team leader meeting, during which the team leaders would come up with the dos and don'ts for all the volunteers during the summer time. Apart from rules such as being

punctual and remembering to clean up the classrooms, the team leaders unanimously agreed that all volunteers should "model themselves as teachers" (为人师表, *wei ren shi biao)*. As vague as this statement was, what they really meant was to dress themselves properly, especially in front of the students. The "appropriate" kind of clothing to present oneself becomes crucial in becoming a *jie di qi* person.

There were several ways that the volunteers could do so. As the summer programs happened during the hottest season in one of the hottest provinces in China, the only weather-appropriate clothing was shorts, skirts, and T-shirts. During the pre-field orientations, ZY Project staff stated clearly that volunteers should not wear clothes that were too expensive or of luxurious brand names. In particular, girls should try not to wear lower neck tops, or skirts that fell on top of the knees. The volunteers were also advised to pack light, because most of what they needed could be purchased in nearby shops: they should only pack a small suitcase that included the absolute necessities they would need during their stay in the rural area. Particularly sensitive items included hand sanitizers, portable electronic gadgets (such as projectors), and excessive pairs of shoes, makeup, or clothes of explicitly exposing nature. To prevent the volunteers from wearing flip-flops (considered a kind of slippers in China) to class, some alumni also advised the volunteers to pack formal shoes to wear in class.

As a result, how the volunteers presented themselves in the rural community could be quite different from the way they presented themselves in their "normal lives." Male volunteers who wore shirts and suits at school showed up in rural places with sporty shorts and plain T-shirts. Some even told me that the clothes that they deliberately packed were worn-out clothes that could be thrown away before they left the rural school. For

female volunteers, such differences were expressed in various ways. They carried backpacks instead of the usual handbags or pouches that they would carry during pre-field orientations. As the program itself was very busy and often involved going out with students under the burning sun, the female volunteers stopped wearing makeup and "only put a layer of sunscreen before going out." The volunteers started to wear cheap and inconspicuous clothes; some even wore pajama pants to group meetings. Pointing to a pair of cotton blue shorts, Yang Yi, a recent graduate from a British undergraduate institution, explained to me, "I bought these shorts before coming to Changpu. I didn't know what to wear and I looked at my wardrobe, thinking that those were all too expensive and not suitable to wear at field sites. So I went on Taobao.com and bought a pair of 20 RMB shorts." Yi thought that the usual outfits she wore in the UK were not "compatible with the rural area" so she bought cheap, plain clothing that was not branded. "You don't want to wear a pair of Ferragamo high heels to take a photo that documents your time in the rural area," another volunteer put it this way.

On the contrary, those who wore make up, or packed "six pairs of shoes for a three-week program" were particularly frowned upon: these volunteers were considered as "too self-centered" as they did not consider the influence of their appearance to the students. The volunteers considered dressing in less conspicuous ways to be an important aspect when they spent time with rural students.

To Use the Proper Language and Materials

A running joke in ZY Project goes that "in ZY Project, we don't mix Chinese and English together." The sentence is spoken in Chinese with the exception of "mix" and

"ZY Project," both in English. Most of the volunteers would laugh at this joke, because they see themselves doing this in their everyday conversations. As soon as they got to the rural schools, they started to monitor their conversations so that they would not intertwine English phrases such as "due date" and "deadline" frequently with their Chinese. When they were preparing lesson plans, they were cautious not to use materials in English, or those materials that needed VPN (Virtual Private Network, services to get around the Chinese governmental internet access censorship) services in order to gain access to, such as videos on YouTube.com. Some worried about the limited internet connections in the rural areas, and downloaded all the multimedia materials to their own hard drives before arrival.

To Properly Toast and Seat on the Banquet Tables

Another critical practice in volunteers' attempts to *jie di qi* relates to dining etiquettes. Upon arriving at the local schools, one of the most important events that the volunteers needed to go through was to attend a banquet meal hosted by school officials. Seeing the volunteers as individuals from the "foreign land" and always apologizing for how they were not able to provide better material conditions for the volunteers during their stay, the local teachers and school officials always arranged a meal upon the volunteers' arrival to show their hospitality, and this meal would usually take place in the most expensive restaurant in the local area. Cost of the meal was covered by the local school's budget. Among those present at this occasion were the school principal, the teacher in charge of external affairs, and those teachers who were interested in ZY Project's summer program. As a result, the twenty-year-old volunteers would need to sit

116

and dine with a group of Hunan teachers, who were at least in their late 30s. To most of the volunteers, this would be the first time that they would dine with people of in this age group without the presence of their guardians or family members.

Normally, volunteers born in the urban areas had not encountered situation like this before. Nor would they know much about the complicated system of seating, toasting, and eating etiquettes in China. Adding to the complication is that, during the meals, the volunteers were at lost when the principals and local teachers proposed toasting to them, especially since drinking and toasting are important aspects of social ritual in Chinese official and business contexts. While they were sitting through the meal, they sent WeChat messages to one another, asking one another when would be a good time to propose a toast themselves in response to the toasts from the side of the school. Later, they told me that they had no idea when and what was appropriate, and what they did was to imitate the others they knew so as to "get by through this situation." Awkward as it was, the volunteers felt that they themselves observed the local rules. Those who did not have such an intention did not behave properly.

To this, Rao Hei, a ZY Project alumni commented, "The younger generation is so clueless. They really don't know when to speak or what to talk about…" Having gone through these situations himself first as a volunteer, then as a part-time staff member who frequently traveled to different field-sites and accompanied the volunteers with local school officials, he told me that he was tired of these scenarios. As I asked him to give me an example about the "clueless" moments, he shared with me the following story:

> Rao Hei: Let me tell you a story, a very embarrassing story in *Zhiyou*'s history actually. At one time, we (volunteers, including himself and Niu Huang) were going out for dinner with Principal Song. Here was the door, and across the room

was where windows were [pointing and showing the directions to me]. Niu Huang walked into the room. To show his respect, Niu Huang pulled the chair by the window and invited Principal Song to sit there. Principal Songzi did not say a thing, walked past this chair, pulled out the chair on the right, and sat onto that chair. Obviously he was offended! So I had to walk up and pretend to joke to Niu Huang, "Niu Huang, look, you grew up in a foreign country [Note: Niu Huang's family moved to North America when he was twelve]. Of course you don't know about this. Let me do the seating again. Principal Songzi is our guest of honor: he should sit here. You are the one who host this occasion, so you should sit there. Secretary Wang is the second guest of honor, so he should sit here. The team leader is the second host, so she should sit there. I'd sit here, etc., etc." Then we proceeded to eat…

Chenyu: So where did Niu Huang ask Principal Song to sit?

Rao Hei: The place for the person who hosts the occasion. Whoever sits there pays the bill! … Similarly, when I accompanied the volunteers to dine with school officials, after the first round of toasting proposed by the principal, I saw the volunteers themselves starting to drink amongst themselves! … Or they would stand up and start to toast the principal even before the principal finished up his rounds, etc., etc. There were just too many of these stories. I really don't want to talk about them anymore.

Rao Hei ended the conversation in a frustrated tone. In order to justify Niu Huang's lack of knowledge about seating etiquettes and save the relationship between ZY Project and the local school, Rao Hei used Niu Huang's experience of growing up abroad as an excuse for Niu Huang's inability to intermingle with the locals in a correct way. Later, Niu Huang said that as much as he did not like these etiquettes and felt these rules were tiring, in order to "deal with the school officials," he had to do this.

Hence, the volunteers' deliberate attempt to *jie di qi* has changed their modes of existence in the rural area. They dress themselves in a plain way, attempt to follow a different set of local etiquettes especially when working with the locals, and learn the

language and knowledge to the best they could. Such keen alterations on their selves have then given the volunteers an alternative way of experiencing Chinese society.

"Living in the Present" as an Authentic Way of Living

What makes their ways of being more different is the experience of time on the part of the volunteers. With the complex program structure outlined in Chapter Four, the time table of ZY Project's short-term programs is always extremely packed. Since the volunteers need to prepare for teaching and debrief the day and plan for activities for the next day, their days would not end until 10pm, if not later. Some volunteers also reported to me that their planning meetings always lasted until past midnight. The only "free" time that the volunteers have was their lunch time, during which they mainly talked about their conversations and teaching in the morning or use this time to plan for other activities in the day. To maximize the use of the program time, such a packed daily schedule gets repeated six days a week, leaving only one day as the "break" day, during which most volunteers catch up on their hours of sleep that they missed and on the lesson plans and reports that they should have written during the six-day week.

Hence, the entire life of the volunteers is devoted to the program itself: "Oh, whatever, I'll think about it after the program is finished." A volunteer put it this way when I asked about their personal and academic plans after the program. On the rare occasions when the volunteers made phone calls to their parents, they reported back their volunteer life, mainly about the students and volunteers they met and the food they ate. Rarely did the conversation relate to their university life, their future plans, etc. In a sense, the time that the volunteers spent in the summer program was exclusively devoted

to the program itself: they were running around busy teaching, talking to the students, preparing for lesson plans. "I've been deferring the need to think about what I need to take care of in my real life." What they emphasized was, in fact, the idea that they were able to focus on the present and devote themselves to one particular project: to work as a qualified volunteer.

While I unpack the experiential and ethical significance of working *for the others* in detail in the next chapter, here, I explain the significance of the rural place in relation to the mode of "living in the present." They told me that they would have to "go back to their real and cruel life" after the end of the summer program. The things they needed to take care of for themselves, the usual, everyday school matters such as course selection, student club involvements, internship, and graduate school applications, etc., were brushed aside in the minds of the volunteers. When a group of ZY Project volunteers revisited the ZY Space where they spent the past summer, they said that it was "only here, in this particular place that the feeling happens to me." Other volunteers wrote in their reflections that "Changpu No.1 High School always has a place in my [her] hearts" or "I [she] has left a piece of herself in Changpu." It is clear that "living in the present" is intricately related to the place, which is not part of the volunteers' "real life" in the urban and/or foreign places.

Hence, although such busy scenes resemble strikingly to the "busyness" practices that fashion an elite self for a neoliberal business world,[14] the "busyness" that my

---

[14] In ethnographic accounts on elites, being busy is not a new phenomenon. For instance, in Shamus Khan's *Privilege* (2010), in St. Paul, an American elite boarding school, students learn the "practices of 'busyness'" as part of their campus life. These practices include "walking around campus, meeting with friends, going to group meetings" for the purposes of "building and maintaining relationships, involving oneself in groups, and

volunteers put themselves into is voluntary and has a natural temporal end. The significance of living in the present in relation to the rural place lies precisely here: having been pushed forward on the idealized educational trajectory, the volunteers feel that to come to the rural and to experience the rural is an attempt to embody something different from the developmentalist rationale that has a deep root in the Chinese drive for modernization. To be able to live a present-oriented live and focus on the one task at hand becomes their implicit yet collective critique to the ceaseless mode of striving and the developmentalist, neoliberal mandate they had experienced in urban China and abroad alike. For them, to live in the present moment is an authentic way of living, contras to the "busy," "cruel," and "chaotic" lives that the youths are used to in their lives.

The Moral Significance of Being a *Jie Di Qi* Person

Yet, while it is easy to interpret the above-mentioned practices as the volunteers' attempts to adhere to local values, in the conversations of my volunteers, to behave and speak properly is a matter of "being a good person" in the rural area. Here, I give an example from Wang Bianjing. Having graduated from a second-tier university in Xi'an as an Engineering English major, Bianjing was introduced by ZY Project to a group of students graduated from elite universities, including from the U.S. and in China. Apart from being impressed by the "abilities and knowledge" of these people, Bianjing did feel strongly against one particular type of behavior, which he described as "so removed from the reality." He then told me that he didn't "see them [the other colleagues with elite

---

developing a distinctive personal character" (p. 179). Using "busyness" as an example, Khan powerfully argues that such "work" is an integral constitutive practice of forming the elite self for a neoliberal business world.

121

university background] as 'all great people.' There are things that I don't like about them." Below is one story that he shared with me.

The story took place during his pre-field orientation, in which the volunteers themselves were asked to conduct a CEP project themselves. His group was assigned to explore a local temple and find out the relationship between the community and the temple. Bianjing's group came back with decent pictures on the rituals, deities, and the people who were doing the worship, hence, put together a dynamic presentation for the other volunteers. However, he was not impressed by his colleague's "disrespectful behavior." He told me the full version during an interview:

> Well, during the training session, when we did the community exploration project together, I went with her [a volunteer/staff graduated from an elite Chinese university]. At the time, we went to the Tao Gong temple. This person insisted that the plastic wrap shouldn't be burned and placed in the incense burner, and she just had to pull it out and put out the incense fire. The Miaozhu (庙祝, the person whose duty is to keep incense burning at a temple) told her that she shouldn't do so and attempted to prevent her from doing so. That's the rule in my hometown as well, because that's a taboo. I remember the mother and the child [who burned the incense for the deities]. They prayed for a long time after burning it. This scene, I remember it well…

This particular volunteer and staff was known for her stringent observations on rules and values: from consolidating a Word document of the handbook for printing to preventing the wasting of recyclable white papers, she always adhered to rules that she thought were correct. This was best seen from the work that she did every year before pre-field orientations, for which she needed to put together the Handbook. Sleeping for no more than four hours several days in a row, she meticulously edited every single detail of the document—paying special attention to issues such as punctuation and indentation so that the Word document would be acceptable for printing. She also kept reposting

WeChat articles on existing urban-rural structural inequalities in China. Yet when she stuck to these values too much, the incompatibility of her ideals with the local practices was brought to the fore: burning a piece of plastic wrap was surely environmentally unfriendly; however, in Bianjing's mind, it was simply a taboo that she pulled out the incense from the burner. It was his rule—the local rule—that she should not do so.

Bianjing was highly critical of this incident, saying that things like this made him feel his colleagues was "stupid and sometimes ridiculous." What he was critiquing was the way in which the female volunteer was *not* able to adapt her value— environmentalism, according to Bianjing—to the local ritual practice. After a while, seeing the practices as disrespectful, Bianjing told me that they "sometimes are too stubbornly serious about things" (太较真了): "they are always like, if anything went wrong in the society, then it is the fault of the society [but not themselves]. So the society could only respond, 'so it's my fault then?' [Speaking in a sarcastic tone]" When hearing about an elite student's idealistic statement that "if I[she] can't live in an ideal world, I am [she is] going to make one myself [herself]," Bianjing responded with contempt, "sure, she could do that but surely she needed to write her own Bible first. They don't need to pay taxes when saying these. In fact, that they are saying so shows that they don't pay any respect to the world, nor to themselves."

Here, the "world" that Bianjing was talking about is a local one—the one in which he grew up and one that has its own values and proper ways of being. On the contrary, the volunteer he described as not connected to the soil only lived in her world with the seemingly universal values. What Bianjing critiqued, then, was the fixed way of doing things, the unmalleable self of that volunteer. His criticism resembles what Osburg

(2013) has pointed out about the new rich and the *suzhi* discourse in China. In his ethnography on subject-formation of elite Chinese entrepreneurs, Osburg documents the ways in which non-elites uses *suzhi* to critique the moral failings of the new rich. As the new rich were critiqued as people who "may have money, but lack quality (*suzhi*)" (p. 36), the material and capitalist world the new rich crafted for themselves was in conflict with other people's values, such as having quality. Similarly, not being "connected to the soil" and strictly adhering to values—such as environmentalism—was critiqued. From Bianjing's perspective, she only lives in her own bubble crafted by herself and like-minded people around her. Bianjing did not want to become this kind of people, who were "detached from the reality too much." To *jie di qi* is a value of moral significance.

Coda: Fashioning a Malleable Self through the Rural Site

Most of the volunteers I cite in this chapter are those who are educated abroad or in Chinese urban cities and have already developed an understanding that situates themselves and China in the global arena. Pressured and dissatisfied by the cultural mandate, they had to practice various kinds of work on themselves in order to truly distance themselves from the "normal lives." In other words, *jie di qi* becomes a self-fashioning technique for the volunteers to retain their modern (hence, foreign) self while being able to claim themselves to do something alternative (hence, rural) at the same time. Similar to Hansen's (2015) middle-class Chinese international students, who dwell in the present to search for intense personal development in their time in the international exchange program, my informants make use of the time in volunteering programs to

negotiate the different kinds of identities that they have brought to themselves in their journeys abroad.

At the same time, going "down" to the countryside for volunteering is related to the Chinese youths' attempt to move across the territories of the Chinese moral geography. This moral geography has the soil as its foundation, and has been gradually enlarged to the "foreign." Moving down to the countryside, therefore, constructs a kind of cosmopolitanism that is culturally particular. No longer are the youths satisfied with their experiences in China: the "rural" is a critical element in their attempts to fashion a cosmopolitan identity. Some volunteers even spoke about the ideal of global citizens that they had encountered abroad, and spoke about coming back to rural China as part of their attempt to become truly "global." The desire of the global citizens—to "help" and to search for alternative modes of existence—is expressed in a culturally particular way among my informants. One has to be able to connect to the rural and to survive the foreign in order to become a true cosmopolitan person, or a global citizen.

Therefore, in attempting to become down-to-earth and to synthesize the foreign and the rural, the volunteers collectively conceptualize a cosmopolitan identity that is different from that of their Western peers. This cosmopolitanism encompasses the rural, the urban, and the foreign, and stresses heavily on the malleability of the self: one has to be able to do what is appropriate when facing people with different backgrounds. This cosmopolitanism also embodies the ideal of living in the present time and doing something seemingly unrelated to the culturally ideal path of moving into the future.

Yet the desire of being empathetic and open, and becoming malleable did not bring an enjoyable period in the countryside. On the contrary, most of the volunteers spoke about the hardship that they have suffered through, and some of them even told me that the experience was not enjoyable. In the middle of the volunteer program, I talked with Zhang Youqian, a first year undergraduate anthropology major, as we were walking to the student classroom in the 100 °F weather. She complained to me about her volunteering experience jokingly:

> Honestly, I really do think, to me, coming to Yuanlu and to volunteer is to *jump out of my comfort zone*. I am an anti-social person myself. If you ask me, I don't even want to talk to strangers or to have a conversation with people who are younger than me… This is really a challenge. But if you ask me or Meiqian, another volunteer who is a year ahead of me in my high school, we would really say that this is a major constitutive experience that made us who we are.

What does she mean by a "constitutive experience"? In the next chapter, I turn to unpack the critical experiential domain of volunteering, and explain further the ethical value of volunteering.

Chapter 6: Eating Bitterness: Volunteering for Self-Transformation

The previous chapter explicates the volunteers' attempt to live an authentic life in the field-sites. It also lays out the busy schedules of the programs. In this chapter, I turn to unpack the ways in which the volunteers experience such "busyness" in the rural site. Through two stories, I show the importance of struggles on the path of negotiating a Chinese cosmopolitan self. This self-transformation is also of ethical value.

The Changpu summer volunteer program takes place on the third and fourth floor of the library building in Changpu No.1 High School. Located on the far side of the campus, the building has five floors, only one of which is used as the actual library. On normal school days, students rarely have the chance to make a trip to the building given the short breaks they have: in ten minutes, they have to run to the building, browse through the library electronic catalog, tell the librarian the book title, and wait for her to get the book for them.[15] In the students' minds, the library building is a distant, unessential place. Walking from the dorm to the library during a regular school day, I heard a fourteen-year-old girl commenting, "who would walk in this direction? It's those

---

[15] In rural Chinese schools, books in the library are not for open-shelf browsing. Students would need to pinpoint the exact title of the book for the librarian, who then checks the book out for them. Most of the students spend a lot of time browsing through an online catalogue in order to find the book they want.

who are in love." Her way of characterizing puppy love couples was adorable; however, her comments about the path speaks to the inconvenience and remoteness of the building itself.

Each summer, when the majority of students have already left for their summer breaks, ZY Project Summer Program volunteers arrive and liven up the building. Mostly freshmen and sophomore students (18- to 20-year olds) studying in top universities in China and the U.S., they come with ideas for lesson plans and the passion to teach. As they come, the remote and quiet library building become lively. Through the twenty days, volunteers and students run on an at least 12-hour day schedule: the students' day begins at 8 a.m. and lasts until 8 p.m., while the volunteers wake up at 7 a.m. and won't stop meeting, planning for the next day and working on the curriculum until around midnight.

On one of these busy days, I finally got to my dorm around midnight. As I sat down on my wooden hard-bunk bed covered with a thin cotton layer, I turned on the fan, trying to disperse the 85 °F, 80% humidity heat. Then, I opened my WeChat app, starting to read messages I had missed throughout the day. My eyes were caught by the lively discussions in the larger summer volunteer group chat: there were more than a few hundred unread messages and the volunteers were still texting each other at such a late hour. At the same time, the Changpu WeChat group (which consists of only Changpu volunteers) was very quiet. It seemed that the volunteers have formed a "texting-and-updating" ritual: working in different field sites, they were always busy texting to their fellows at other field-sites about their volunteering lives. Some won't stop texting until saying goodnight at 2 a.m..

Why do volunteers have to send these messages at such late hours of the day? After all, with a sixteen-hour daily schedule, everyone is exhausted. What do they talk about in those messages, and why do they have to "pour water" to the WeChat group (*shui qun,* 水群， literally "watering the group," or sending meaningless posts in an online forum/community)? As a member of the group, I complained that these messages were quite unnecessary. Hearing my complaint, Hongyan,[16] another on-site observer responded with a sarcastic tone, "you contribute more if you sacrifice (*xi sheng,* 牺牲) more. These kids are our children so of course we can't lose."

Hongyan's comments about "sacrifice" and "children" speak across educational volunteering programs in China. A few questions emerged: why volunteering is a form of "sacrifice"? For whom and for what? What are the differences between "students" and "children"? Why do volunteers refer to the "students" as their "babies"?

"Working Hard" as in the WeChat Messages

To answer these questions, it is helpful to take a closer look at the content of the WeChat messages. Firstly, volunteers constantly post pictures of student works. These include poster boards, poetry, and written reflections created or composed by the students. For instance, in a Seminar entitled "My Dream House", Yuntong asked her students to come up with design plans to transform a space on the school campus. After a few rounds of back and forth among the six students who took her seminar, they decided to "repaint" the outer wall of Changpu's ZY Space with colored sticky notes. The plan

---

[16] Hongyan worked as a long-term volunteer in ZY Space during the time I carried out fieldwork in Changpu county.

was to sketch out mosaic patterns of a few cartoon characters or patterns (such as Minion, Spiderman) and to buy colored papers and decorate the outer wall of ZY Space. Progress on this decoration project was captured and posted to volunteers in other field-sites. These also appeared on WeChat Moment timelines as well, with photo captions such as "my kids" "look at how talented they are!" Volunteers in other sites also posted similar progress pictures or posts in the group chat.

Another salient element in these messages was pictures about late night group meetings and lesson planning. With a packed schedule and rigid rules for these meetings, the volunteers' days would not end until at least 11 p.m. every night. During the meetings, they debriefed the day, provided feedback to teaching and program operation, and went through schedules of the following days. As I sat through the meetings, I saw the volunteers secretly snapping pictures of the serious discussion scenes and sending to the large WeChat group immediately. A WeChat message then followed as his/her photo caption, "… still in the meeting." From time to time, when volunteers had to stay up late to prepare for next day's classes, volunteers took pictures of the working scene and posted on their WeChat Moment updates, saying that so-and-so "are still working and prepping." In Changpu, Yena, the curriculum leader, took pictures of late-night work, student work, and the peaceful school every day. Yena commented on how the volunteers worked together as comrades during these challenging times. At very late hours of the day, if there were still students working at the volunteer's office working on their projects, the volunteers would also take and post pictures of students cutting colored papers, or reviewing movie footages, or writing scripts of their Digital Storytelling projects.

There were also some pictures of the school environment and the county. Volunteers took pictures of their dorm rooms upon arrival, and then posted local scenes such as the spring water puddings, plaza dances, and temple rituals. They sometimes also posted pictures of going out for local barbecues and Karaoke places.

Embedded in the group chats were a few larger messages: 1) we [the volunteers] work hard and we have to work hard; 2) we are suffering through the program because it is hard; 3) our kids are creative and talented, so we are enjoying the program; 4) the field-sites are great and we are having a lot of fun. While the "children" discourse is important, I will take this topic up in the next chapter. In the following pages, I present the hard work of the volunteers not only as it was portrayed in WeChat, but also from the eyes of the volunteers themselves. In particular, I unpack the intense physical, intellectual, and emotional sufferings that the volunteers went through in these programs, and show how such experience represents their efforts to form a full person in the contemporary Chinese society.

Hard Work, Suffering, and Eating Bitterness (*Chi Ku*, 吃苦) in China

The ethos of hard-working featured prominently in volunteers' conversations. But why is volunteering a form of hard labor? Why do volunteers have to talk about the "hard work" that they do? Scholars have documented the idea of hard work in existing literatures. It can relate to the American Dream, the notion that if one works hard enough, he or she could receive what one strives for; those who work very hard need to talk about it, because this is part of the "culture of smartness", an illusion that privileged youths create to naturalize hard work (Ho, 2009). In the Chinese context, "hard work" is related

to the concept of *chi ku* (吃苦, enduring hardships, directly translated as "eating bitterness") that is vastly important in the Chinese theory of parenting and learning. The "bitterness" here is not related to feelings of anger, resentfulness, or previous experiences of unjust treatments: literally, "bitterness" means hardship.

"Eating bitterness" is a critical concept in the Chinese theory of learning. The debate about the Tiger Mother stereotype is a good place to start this discussion. In her highly controversial personal reflection, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* Amy Chua, Yale Law School professor and second generation Chinese-American, writes that "everything valuable and worthwhile is difficult." She sends her children to endless extracurricular activities because she believes that children have to endure difficulties in order to build characters and invest in the future. Different from the taken-for-granted notion that childhood should be carefree and fun, Chua's comments represent the parenting ideology of a generation of Chinese parents. With the implementation of the One Child Policy that creates the 4-2-1 family structure, the idea that children are incapable to "tolerate hardships and setbacks" has become the subject of much grumbling. In response, as a separate domain of children's lives, schools bear the task of toughening students so as to prepare them for the "reality" (the society) out there. Schools accomplish this task through constantly challenging the students, putting them through an accumulative process that is fraught with obstacles and distractions, over a long period of time. Knowledge should not come overnight. For this purpose, Chinese parents and teachers are particularly careful in not spoiling the children and put them through hardships so that they could learn how to handle difficulties later in their lives.

Adults are usually very critical on the young if they could not endure the hardships. For instance, watching a TV show about young students' rustic hiking and camping trip, one of Woronov's informants shook her head upon seeing that new members of the Beijing Communist Youth League, aged about fourteen, carried imported junk food—bottles of sprite and coke, packages of Oreos and Fritos—on their trips (Woronov, 2009). Already in her forties, the mother took part in the Up To the Mountains and Down to the Countryside movement, a massive urban to rural migration movement in the Cultural Revolution in China. Her disapproval reflects a Chinese view of "growing up": only after one is able to endure the hardest conditions could one excel.[17] In the mind of Chinese parents and teachers, enduring hardships is necessary for the already privileged "little emperors" at home not to be too spoiled. Hardships are necessary for adolescents to form full personhood.

Volunteering for Bitterness

What stands out from the WeChat messages is another dimension of hardship from which the volunteers are suffering. After all, different from the young League members who were arranged to go for rustic hiking, the volunteers *willingly* signed up for these programs, rather than being forced to participate in the programs due to institutional obligations. In other words, the hardships that the young volunteers confronted were created by themselves: they volunteer for bitterness.

---

[17] The original Chinese phrase (吃得苦中苦方为人上人) is literally translated as, only if one is able to eat the bitterest kind of bitter, one is able become a person that is above all."

Here, it is useful to take another look at the "bitterness" portrayed in WeChat messages. What is conspicuously lacking from these messages are the actual, physical hardships. One would expect volunteers to complain about how classrooms without air conditioning in a 100 ˚F summer were unbearable, how hard it was for them to teach without functional projectors or internet connections, about the limited shower time, the bunk dorm beds, and the spiciness of the school cafeteria.[18] Yet for my informants, the program was hard because of the tasks they set for themselves and the goals they needed to accomplish. They wanted to teach something meaningful to the kids, so they had to stay up late at night; they should leave the children a great memory in their dull high school summer days so they took extra effort, scratching their heads,   just to find a good topic for tomorrow's classes; the kids would appreciate them leaving handmade souvenirs after they left the county, so they had to make use of this short period of time to design a unique logo for customized bookmarks, T-shirts, and mugs. In a sense, the volunteers would not accomplish their own missions without achieving the goals they set for themselves, and with such accomplishments, the volunteering experience would come to a full circle. The youths volunteered for bitterness.

Shouldn't hard work be something these youths stay away from in their summer holidays? With their middle-class family backgrounds, one would think that naturally, these youths would prefer to enjoy life elsewhere on a beach in the summer. Here, it is useful to look at another group of Chinese residents who also willingly "eat bitterness": the rural migrants. Due to China's deepening urban-rural divide and the Chinese desire for urbanity, more than 277.5 million rural residents have migrated to urban cities in

---

[18] Local food in Xiangxi is notoriously famous its spiciness.

search for fortune, happiness, and independence (Gaetano, 2004; Jacka, 2006; Pun, 2005; Beynon, 2012). About half of all rural labor migrants are women; most are young and single. Living in urban cities, they are patient to endure financial hardship and difficult living conditions (Loyalka, 2012). The migrants take up jobs such as construction workers, general service workers, and beauty salon workers, trusting a better future, or accepting the lack of a predictable future. Some rural women even take on sex worker jobs in order to "get ahead" in the urban environment (Zheng, 2009). Notably, the first generation migrant workers relate their choices of migration and ensuing hardships to their children: they want to give their children a better education and future. For these individuals, eating bitterness is a "sacrifice" for the younger generation.

Moreover, in China, there has been a genre of practices that are related to bitterness. These are referred to as *chiku* (吃苦，literally translated as "eating bitterness") and *suku* (诉苦，literally translated as "speaking bitterness"), both of which were used in revolutionary mobilization and the education of peasants, workers, intellectuals, and students in the 1940s and 1950s and again during the Cultural Revolution. Young urban intellectuals and students were mobilized to eat bitterness by living and working among peasants in the liberated rural base during the Yan'an period (early 1940s) and in poor and difficult rural areas during the Cultural Revolution. Only by shaping their lives around the bases of revolution could these intellectual youths cultivate a true class feeling toward the masses and transform themselves from petite bourgeoisie into proletarian revolutionaries. For these intellectuals and students, eating bitterness was a way to embody and materialize their revolutionary enthusiasm and to produce and prove themselves as subjects of revolution.

The sense of "sacrificing" for *others* appeared in my conversations with numerous individuals in the field, especially those with rural teachers and local residents. For instance, Director Cheng, the ZY Project Ambassador in Changpu No. 1 High School, always told me that she thought "there's nothing to study here in the school" and "you have sacrificed too much for staying here in Changpu, such a remote and backward place." After the volunteers arrived at Changpu No.1 High School and seeing how the lights in ZY Space didn't dim off until late every day, Director Cheng posted this on her WeChat Moment update:

> Eleven volunteers, from top universities in China and abroad, came over to the remote and rural place for our kids. In order to do the Community Exploration Project, they went out with the children under the heat; in order to prepare for the next day's lesson, they hardly sleep at night. They don't ask money from us, not even a cent. They are here for doing activities for the kids (WeChat Moment posts, Director Cheng).

Along with this post, she also posted scenes of students attending volunteers' courses attentively and seriously participating in the various activities. As I had spent a few months in Changpu, every time she saw me, she would always emphasize how touched she was to see the best urban youths (me included) were willing to come over to such a remote and distant place for "nothing." "All of you have sacrificed too much," she said.

Having befriended Director Hou on WeChat, the volunteers "liked" her posts, and responded with remarks such as, "it's our duty" or "it's not difficult." When they went out with students to the local community for class assignments, local residents were often very curious about these youths. Holding compact cameras in hands and speaking in Mandarin Chinese, the volunteers looked conspicuously not local. As soon as the locals heard that the youths travelled to Changpu to volunteer, the locals would usually

comment that university students "have sacrificed too much for our kids." To these comments, one volunteer, Yuntong smiled and responded, "this is what we are here for, and what we *should* do."

The volunteers' remarks are resoundingly similar to those of the rural migrants, except that the youths' moving trajectory is reversed and their durations of stay is limited. Unlike the rural migrants who move to urban areas and willingly suffer for years, the volunteers travel to rural areas and sacrifice for three weeks. The question then becomes, for whom do the volunteers sacrifice, and for what purposes?

The Ethical Value of Volunteering: Peeping into the "Bitterness"

I turn to a closer look at the hardships through two stories: one of Jin Shutong, and the other of Tang Yan. Both of the young women created, experienced, and overcame hardships in their twenty days in Changpu. Both of them also ended up with renewed knowledge about themselves. Their frustrations and disappointments were critical, as these were the foundations on which they managed to resolve questions or dilemmas they had at the beginning. Although the two stories ended in somewhat different ways, Shutong and Tang Yan's stories demonstrate the moral value of "bitterness," even if in fact the bitterness were created by themselves.

Part I: Frustrations and Disappointments

Shutong: "I AM putting my heart into it!"

I first met Jin Shutong in the pre-field orientation in Beijing. Shutong was 5'7" tall, tanned, and very sporty. By the time she participated in the program, she was a rising

senior student in a major research university in the U.S.. Her father works as a professor, also in a major research university in China. During the pre-field orientation, Shutong struck me as someone who didn't know much about or care about embellishing social relationships with endearing words. Unlike the other volunteers who could refer to each other as "darling" and "honey"[19] even though they had known one another for only a few days, Shutong did not speak up much in group meetings or in the WeChat group. Quiet and reserved most of the time, she only threw out non-sequitur or random questions, or asked straightforward questions. For example, in a planning meeting during the orientation, Shutong brought up the issue of technology in Changpu No.1 High School. She specifically wanted to know whether the classrooms were equipped with projectors and internet. Upon knowing that the team only had one projector located in a large auditorium and the internet would not be available in the classrooms, she exclaimed with a hint of anger, "then how am I supposed to teach my seminar about internet and media!" Other volunteers did not directly respond to her comments. They suggested her to download her online materials and teach the seminar offline. Later, when staff and mentors were debriefing one another about the volunteers, Kunkun came over to me and asked, "she's one more of those [bourgeois babies], huh?" I did not respond.

After arriving at Changpu, Shutong did not teach the seminar on internet and media that she had designed. She told the staff that she debated with herself on the overnight train and had decided to change her topic to neurobiology. When other volunteers asked why neurobiology instead of something that she could easily tweak her

---

[19] In China, it is considered superficial to address people with these phrases, unless the person using the term has established intimate relationship with the person he or she is addressing to.

original materials to, she responded that she would like to teach students something "tangible and related to their high school curriculum." As a neurobiology major herself, Shutong also thought that it was probably the easiest subject matter she could handle. As the volunteer program had already officially started, by the time she made this decision, Shutong only had one day to prepare a syllabus and eight two-hour lesson plans for her new seminar. She needed to start from scratch, reconceptualize and redesign her course using the project-based learning and *Understanding by Design* frameworks. For the first session, she stayed up all night, preparing for PowerPoint presentations and handouts for students.

However, the first session ended up being the only session she taught. Shutong cancelled the seminar. When I passed by her classroom thirty minutes before the session was over, Shutong and her seven students were sitting there and staring at one another in silence. "So how do you feel about today's class? What should I improve on? What are some topics you guys want to study in later classes?" Shutong asked these questions to solicit feedbacks and to kill the remaining twenty some minutes. The students answered that "it was OK" or "it was interesting." After the class was over, a student came to me, complaining that he felt "quite regretful that I [he] signed up for the course because it was so boring." He further told me "that two hours was a waste of time." At night, in group meetings, when volunteers were debriefing to each other about their own seminars, Shutong said, "I don't feel good about my seminar. I think I need to prepare more interesting and engaging materials. Students looked not interested." While the other volunteers were offering advice and tips about how they engaged with student attention, Shutong looked down to the floor with her lips tightened. Twenty-four hours later, Yena,

the curriculum leader announced to the team that Shutong has decided to cancel her seminar. Those originally in Shutong's seminar were asked to select another seminar for the remainder of the program.

For Shutong, this was truly a disappointment. Talking to her parents on the phone, she angrily exclaimed: "what can I do? I know I had messed up the entire thing… I have decided to cancel it. But I will do something else. I will lead the Digital Storytelling project… I AM putting my heart into this program. I am doing the BEST I could…" She hanged up on the phone and walked out from the ZY Space angrily. Having witnessed the scene, other volunteers secretly told each other about Shutong's fight with her parents. They then got into a discussion about how they could make Shutong feel better.

Shutong was not the only volunteer who struggled in their teaching and lesson preparations in the program. Every day, volunteers stayed in the ZY Space until after midnight to find teaching materials for the next day to the point that getting seven hours of sleep was a blessing. The phrase "overcoming hardships" (*kefu kunnan*，克服困难) came up repeatedly in the everyday debriefing sessions. They told one another to "hang in there" and offered help to others when they didn't have much to do after the meeting. Towards the end of the program, when presentations were lining up and the final presentation show needed to happen on the county plaza, the team leaders cheered up the team, saying that "a few more days and this suffering could be over." A popular joke in the volunteers' social circles ran like this: volunteering represents two kinds of labor, one intellectual and one physical. It is a form of intellectual labor because the program involves coming up with engaging and interesting lessons with students; it is also physical because, without a healthy body, one could not possibly make through three

weeks of sleep-depriving, 18-hours days. It was through such intensive volunteering labor that the youths considered their volunteering experience complete.

Neo-Confucian thinker Liang Shuming and modern Chinese philosophers of education have written widely about the role of suffering in learning. For instance, concerned about the standardized experiences schools impose upon students in the Chinese education systems, Zhang (2013) writes, "inner struggle is not only constructive but necessary in the experience of cultivating a unique and inclusive individuality" (page number).   "Inner" here does not relate to something completely private and personal; rather, it is related to the struggles that are close to one's deep heart. Facing her parents' questions about whether she was serious about the program and her decisions, Shutong exclaimed that she has "put her heart" (*yong xin zuo*, literally meaning "using the heart to do something") in it. Her response demonstrated her seriousness and the work she had put into the program. The suffering of the volunteers is part of their projects of self-cultivation. In fact, a lot of ZY Project alumni have emphasized that they had learned so much from doing the program that "perhaps we [the volunteers] have learned more than the students from us."

Moreover, in the Chinese theory of learning, the value of suffering is more than successfully accomplishing the goals. The process itself is also moral: suffering through everything one does and says in suffering through hardships contributes to the end of becoming a moral person (Yan, 2013). Neo-Confucian scholar Tu Weiming (1984) states this clearly:

… those who have succeeded in overcoming extreme odds have done so not

141

because of divine intervention, but because of their strong moral fabric. They have learned the art of self-transcendence through physical and mental discipline, for their heightened self-awareness enabled them to bear the Heavenly burden themselves as a categorical imperative. It was a sense of duty to their human nature rather than a submission to an external will that impelled them to endure the pain and suffering that they obviously did not deserve (p. 380).

In order to unpack the ethical value of suffering in the volunteering program, I step back and sketch a brief picture of the contemporary Chinese moral landscape. In China, the decadence of morality in the public sphere has become a hot issue for public discussions. One reads about debates on domestic violence, sexual harassment, and bystander apathy in urban places[20] on various social media venues. The volunteers are no exceptions. They are also experiencing a loss of meaning in life (Liu, 2002; Yan, 2014): one volunteer stated that before coming into ZY Project, he had always felt that he was living a "non-essential life as a nobody to anybody and everybody". Analyzing the psychology of contemporary Chinese citizens, Kleinman (2011) argues that China's extraordinary rapid modernization may have created a special cultural version of a divided self. The innate innate paradoxes embedded in this model poses significant challenges to the self-making project of the Chinese citizens. On one hand, personhood in China includes a deeper sensibility about environmental protection, social welfare, and social justice, while on the other hand, the Chinese state's endeavor to become a cultural and economic global leader also highlight certain (middle-class, Western) styles of material well-being that necessitates constant capital accumulation. China and its younger generations must then engage with global values, including the ethical, aesthetic, religious, and the spiritual,

---

[20] The most well-known story was the story of *Xiao Yue Yue*, a three year girl hit by a car and died. Her body lied on the ground for twenty minutes, during which time passers-by did not even make a phone call to the police.

while keeping a distinct cultural (Chinese) identity. In other words, the contemporary

Chinese state presents its citizens with a challenge: to complete the project of self-

cultivation, the younger generation has to furnish the exterior and the interior self[21] at the

same time.

Contemporary Chinese middle-class have employed various means to accomplish

this task. Farquhar (2002) documents *qigong* (气功, a system of deep breathing

techniques rooted in Chinese science and medicine) as a means for self-cultivation in

urban cities; other anthropologist analyzes the phenomenon of plaza dancing, arguing that

this represents the older Chinese generations' striving for femininity deprived back in the

Maoist era. More recently, *yangsheng* (养生, health preservation practices) has allowed

Beijing residents to "escape without leaving a sometimes uncertain social and political

order that is both experienced and remembered as hand built but fragile" (Farquhar and

Zhang, 2012, p. 22). Madson (2013) documents the rise of grassroot religious activities in

urban and rural China, as Chinese people's desperate and creative means to seek meaning

in their lives. For my informants, volunteering becomes a means to achieve this goal,

because they could acquire the morally self-transformative experience to become an

authentic Chinese individual. When I got to know that a lot of the volunteers requested

certificates for completion from ZY Project to fulfill the social practice requirement in

their university education, I asked why they did volunteer work instead of applying for

---

[21] The exterior vs. interior self-making project is not unique to contemporary Chinese
history. Since the late Qing dynasty, when China was first challenged by Western
imperial powers, Chinese intellectuals, such as Liang Qichao, Liang Shuming, and the
May Fourth intellectuals, have always been thinking about ways for the Chinese state to
find a place on the global stage while maintaining a distinct Chinese identity. Perhaps the
most relevant study is on the Rural Reconstruction Movement documented by Merkel-
Hess (2016).

internships. They said that they had always searched for good organizations that could provide such an experience, and that it was "essential in the undergraduate experience."

Understanding from this perspective, the struggles my informants created for themselves are related to their deep yearnings to become a moral individual in China. This became evident when considering the casual conversations among the volunteers at pre-field orientations. Not willing to conform to "external will"—the Party-State's mandate on volunteerism and the neoliberal job market (see Rolandsen, 2008; Sum, 2017), my informants rarely talked about how volunteering participation was related to subsequent career development; on the contrary, they were cynical about the increasingly apathetic and indifferent Chinese society, bribery and corruption, and the Party-State's increasingly pervasive ideological control. They posted reflections about how they were lucky to be able to meet "idealistic peers" through the NGO. One female volunteer approached a staff member of ZY Project, asking how they were able to "hold onto their authentic selves" despite the menial salaries they received in return. She commented that these full-time staff were her "moral inspirations" for the cause of the public good in China.

Tang Yan: "Do you think they [we] really helped?"

Indeed, volunteers worked very hard, both mentally and physically. With no internet or air conditioning in their dorm rooms, the volunteers made a temporary "bed" in the ZY Space (their main office for meeting and planning). The "bed" was made of foam floor tiles, on top of which they placed a comforter borrowed from the school. At first, whoever wanted to use the "bed" brought their own pillows and blankets from the

144

dorms. As time went on, more and more people took naps or did work on the "bed". The pillows and blankets became public property. Those night owls spent the night on this "bed" on the fourth floor of the remote school building.

Picture 1: Late night working and sleeping on the "bed". Photo taken and edited by Yena when she left for the dorm around midnight one night. I found this photo posted on her WeChat Moment at around 3 a.m..

Spending the nights in ZY Space was fun for the volunteers: they got to lie on the "bed", work on their projects or lesson plans, and chit chat about the students at the same time. ZY Space became a shared place for working, eating, hanging out, and sleeping. During lunch time and at night, the volunteers sat on the "bed", gossiping about the students and chit chatting about their lives in the past and the future. Students came in

from time to time as well, sitting on the "bed" listening. They made fun of the volunteers sleeping on the floor, but at the same time, they also asked questions to the volunteers about their lives in high school and in college, in urban cities and on foreign lands. Witnessing the Space becoming all the more loving and lively ever since the beginning of the program, a student described to me that he loved the Space because it was "such a warm place."

Yet, sometimes, when volunteers were alone by themselves, the question about whether the hard work and sufferings could pay off never went astray. In particular, Tang Yan, a freshman majoring in Chinese literature in a top Chinese university, confronted this question after teaching her Core Ability writing class. One day, as she got off from her class and walked into the Space, she looked melancholic. As she put down her laptop, she lied down onto the "bed" and held the blanket closer to cover her legs. Then she sighed, deeply. Hearing this, I sat down onto the "bed" with her and asked whether her class went well. Tang Yan replied,

> Tang Yan: It was OK. I taught what I prepared last night. But I ran out of materials towards the end and ended the class thirty minutes earlier. I had to keep them in the classroom. So I asked, whether they want to write a few paragraphs then to save some time from homework, or whether they want to play Mafia. They ALL said they wanted to play Mafia.

> Chenyu: So what did you teach? Did you use the original lesson plan (in the handbook)?

> Tang Yan: No. I was preparing a PowerPoint presentation according to the handbook, but decided to teach what I wanted to teach. Compared to teaching about how to write Feature essays, I thought I would just teach them how to write a narrative essay. Last night, I wrote an exemplar essay for them.

Then Tang Yan told me that she had to take a nap: she only got two hours of sleep the night before.

Tang Yan's change of lesson plans did not spring from nowhere. Having gone through the Chinese education system in an urban city, Tang Yan found her passion in Chinese literature and began to write short stories and essays early in high school, and would like to teach the students about the tips that she had about learning Chinese. Moreover, in Changpu No.1 High, seldom is Chinese composition taught in classes. Teachers of Chinese usually spend most of their time teaching passages on the textbooks, the biographies of authors, and the meaning of characters and phrases. When regular school is in session, students always come to me and ask about "secrets" to write a good piece of narrative or argumentative essay. Therefore, Tang Yan thought that showing the students what narrative essays should look like is helpful for the students' subsequent studies. To do so, sacrificing a few hours of sleep was the cost Tang Yan had to pay.

But the students didn't see her efforts in the way she expected. She was disappointed that students didn't want to write a few paragraphs in class. Tang Yan, along with a few other volunteers, expressed this feeling constantly in the planning meetings. They discussed in length about ways to improve pedagogies, and shared tips about how to engage with the students. At last, one day, as I was walking back to the dorm building together with a few volunteers, Tang Yan pulled me aside, asking, "Chenyu, you have seen these programs before, right? Do you think they [previous volunteers] really helped?"

Part II: The Lessons Learned

Shutong: "One also needs to be clear about what this person couldn't do…"

After cancelling the seminar, Shutong shouldered the responsibility of leading and completing the Digital Storytelling (DST) projects.[22] The goal of DST is twofold. As most county-level high schools in China run on a suffocating schedule that only allows students to go out of the school gate for five hours per week, ZY Project hopes to use the summer program to encourage students to explore and interact with the locals in the county community. Through such interactions, ZY Project hopes that high school students could practice skills such as interviewing and note-taking. Another goal is to guide the students through the process of conceptualizing a story, creating the story lines, capturing the audio and visual materials and editing the materials into a full multimedia narrative to be presented in the last class session. The curriculum includes three components: large lectures, small group workshops, and practice sessions. Put simply, different from the urban-centered textbook curriculum taught in regular classes in China, DST is designed to be culturally relevant[23] and to engage with high school student voices and perspectives.

For the volunteers, however, completing the DST project is more complicated than for the students. After all, having spent most of their time in urban cities and/or abroad, the notion of "community" in the rural area is alien to them, not to mention that

---

[22] I will write about the "civilizing and cosmopolitan nature" of ZY Project curriculum in a later chapter.
[23] See Banks (1993, 2008) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) for theoretical foundations about culturally relevant pedagogy. Scholars writing about rural education in China have written at length about the urban-centered nature of Chinese textbooks. See Lou, 2011 and Wu, 2012, 2016 for detailed discussions.

they have only spent a few days in the area. Although some of them have chatted with ZY Project alumni about the place and its history and culture, the volunteers would need to learn about the local community—at least about what is in there, who the local people are, what are worthy of exploring—when they do DST with their own group of students. Cancelling her neurobiology seminar, Shutong became the leader of the entire project. On top of teaching and guiding students in her group to learn about the local community, she was also responsible for coordinating equipment, setting timelines for the team, and sending out reminders to the group so that they were able to complete the projects on time.

DST was one of the least favorite parts for the students and the volunteers during the first few days. Students complained to me that "we just sat in the auditorium and did nothing". The large group lectures were delivered by one volunteer, while the students sat in a lecture hall style auditorium, enduring the 90 ˚F monotone boredom. A lot of students and volunteers fell asleep; some took pictures of volunteers' funny facial expressions when they were teaching, and some texted one another for plans during the breaks. Of course, the blame fell on Shutong: she was the person in charge. She didn't do her job well.

After the second (out of eight) DST section, the team decided to talk to Shutong about the project. Yena asked on the regular team planning meeting, "Shutong, please tell us if there's anything that we could help you with. We know that you are under a lot of pressure and this project is complicated. Is there anything that we could do?… What are you working on?" Other team members also extended their offers to help out. Staring at the screen of her laptop, Shutong kept her mouth tightened for a few seconds. "No I don't

need anything. I will just stay up late tonight to find videoclips to illustrate different shooting angles, as outlined in the curriculum." The air became stiff as she said this. After the meeting, I overheard some volunteers complaining about Shutong's stubbornness. They blamed her for not only being unable to come up with clear instructions or engaging materials, but also refusing to accept help. "The DST was boring, but why would she make it all the more difficult?"

For sure, Shutong knew about others' disappointments and complaints. Working for the project almost every night to localize the curriculum materials (just as Tang Yan did with her Writing class), she browsed through videoclips on YouTube and Chinese video websites for hours, just to find a two-minute videoclip to illustrate how to use narration in a story. One day, she lay on the temporary "bed" facing down, and covered her head and her laptop with a blanket. Another volunteer took a picture of her posture. In class, as they were showing the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon videoclips that Shutong picked for the course, one girl spotted a scene when Jerry posted exactly like what Shutong did when she was preparing for the course. She took a screenshot and photoshopped Jerry's post with the previous Shutong photo together, then sent it to the WeChat group. This was the "Shutong working hard" posture. The photo taker also sent out a smirky smile sticker, which was followed by other's "lol" stickers.

"What were you working on, Shutong? Were you trying to find a cartoon character that look like you?" Shali joked to Shutong during the class break. Initially taken aback by the question, Shutong responded, "…No. I forgot what I was doing actually… Why is this so funny to you? I was just trying to find the video clip." She looked at Shali with a puzzled face.

The picture was a defining moment. As stickers flew around in the WeChat group, volunteers laughed at the hilarious parallel, while Shutong was still quite puzzled about why this random picture was so funny and popular. But this picture has also led to her participation in the group, first on WeChat, then in person. During later planning meetings, she learned to ask for help and to delegate DST tasks to the team. She began to take a lead in the DST discussion sessions, and asked the group to share their progress and future plans for the projects. During break times when she went out for errands, she also took random pictures in Changpu, sent them to the group and told the team about the connection she saw in the picture to the DST stories. In a logo contest, when everyone was scratching their heads about ways to digitize the logo students came up with, Shutong sat on the "bed", drew a logo using PowerPoint, and sent it to the team. As nobody knew that she was doing this, everyone was amazed by what she came up with in a short period of time. Because of her quirky, non-sequitur but to-the-point way of talking, she gradually became the most popular girl in the team, the legendary "Shutong *du* (毒, literarily translated as poison)". The team always looked for Shutong and checked if she were there when they were heading out for lunch, saying that they couldn't live without this "poisonous woman." They still made fun of her, about how her bright orange sun-protective jacket made her skin look tanner and about how she stood out from the crowd because of her northern, Beijing accent. But Shutong had become part of the team. DST became not as painful as before. Volunteers led their students to create stories about the food, the history, the language, and the culture of Changpu. On another night, Hongyan and I were gossiping about the team dynamics as usual. Speaking about DST,

Hongyan commented, non-sarcastically this time, "Shutong has changed. I think she has grown up."
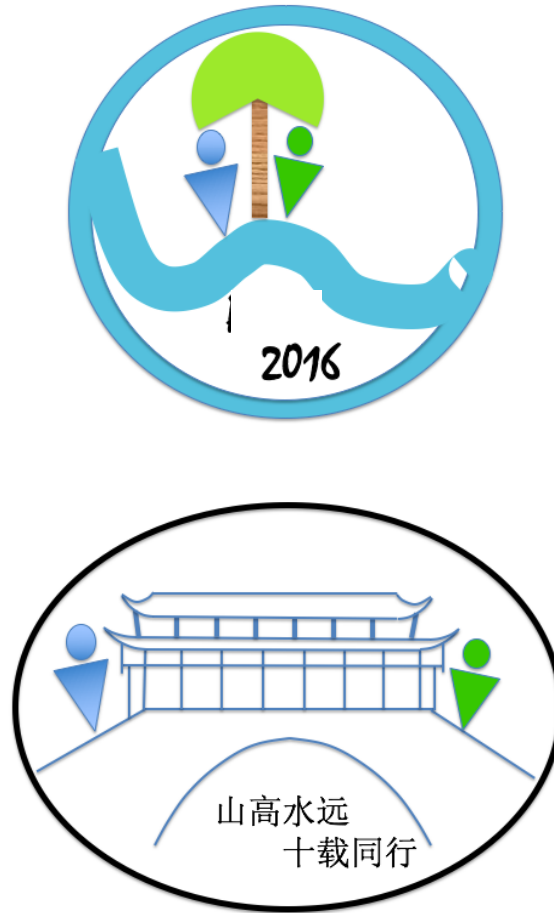
Picture 2: The logos Shutong drew using PowerPoint. I took the locations and ZY Project's characters out for confidentiality purposes.

With this, Shutong's eating bitterness journey has come to a complete circle. When filming a video message that volunteers prepared for the students, Shutong spoke about her self-transformation at length:

It was definitely a challenge. I mean, I met a lot of challenges, in teaching, in life,

and also in dealing with people… Changpu is still unknown to me. I was concerned that it would be very humid here; it's *Xiangxi*, the southern part of China. I packed a lot of quick dry clothes because I was concerned about whether I could do activities if it rains very heavily. But it's not as humid as I thought… And there are a lot of bugs, like, *actual, bugs* [giggle]. Those are two or three times bigger compared to the ones I saw in northern China [burst out laughing and asked "can we stop the recording now?"]. Well I heard that time for showering is limited, but after I came here I found out the problem is really that the water is *too hot* for showers [laugh again]…

In terms of teaching. I should apologize to all. I should have been teaching, but because of my ill planning, I didn't prepare well and cancelled my class. I guess, this kind of volunteering activities makes one know about what he or she can do. But on the other hand, one also needs to be clear about what this person couldn't do… or to acknowledge that in what senses, what he or she should prepare, on what fronts. For instance, I realized that I need to improve myself on multiple fronts, including that I should know more about my own major, how to take care of myself, how to talk to other people, how to lead a project and so on. At the end, I improved myself and also improved the content of ZY Project's curriculum a little bit. I have also met a lot of like-minded peers in this program.

The relationship between volunteers' hard work and volunteering is now clear. Speaking about the challenges she has faced, Shutong only lightly touches on physical hardship and emphasized teaching and lesson planning. She also invokes a Chinese idiom, *zi zhi zhe ming* (自知者明, literal translated as "one who knows about the self is wise"), expressing the idea that real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance. Different from the Western understanding that to know is to grasp a set of given objective and external truths and to internalize certain skills, to know—in East Asian intellectual traditions—is to understand one's mental state and to appreciate one's inner feelings (see Tu, 1984). Such knowledge of the self entails a transforming act upon the self so that it is able to reflect, comprehend, shape, and create. This process is highly individualistic, habitual, and implicit; however, relations—kin, community, and the society at large—are indispensable in this process (Yan, 2013, p. 264).

The volunteer program provides this kind of relations for Chinese youths to acquire self-knowledge. The team also formed a "collectivity of their own" (Rolandson, 2008) in ZY Project, outside family, kin, and the Party collective (also see Kleinman, 2011). What sets the ZY Project apart from the other kinds of collectivities is the hardships they went through in the process of forming this collectivity. Although enduring hardship has been held as indispensable in China throughout history due to the constant poverty and physical drudgery, volunteers such as Shutong and Tang Yan did not have to face these when they grew up. Born into well-off families, they aspire for the intense emotional, intellectual, and physical struggles in the course of self-cultivation. Their sacrifices paid off on an individual level, as they have undergone the moral self-formation.

Tang Yan: "All the anxiety springs from my fear that I could not give."

As for the question of "help" that tortured Tang Yan for days, she gave me an answer herself. During a class period when Tang Yan didn't need to teach, she quietly sat on the "bed" and sighed. I moved closer to her and asked what was wrong. Unexpectedly, she shared the following words with me:

> The happiest time that I ever had these days was yesterday at night, when I sat together with the students in a circle in the middle of the track field. We talked about our highs and lows during the day. At that point, I finally felt that we were equal. I now understand why I was so anxious and worked so hard to prepare the lessons. All the anxiety springs from my fear that I could not give.

By then, Tang Yan also came to know her limits. In the remainder of the program, she saw herself as a "big sister" and wrote in a WeChat post that, "I found out that the kids

and I are really not that different." As many other volunteers said, they learned in the program that they couldn't help much. Yena posted on her Moments timeline saying that, "looking at these children, what we could do and what we could do *only*, is to spare no efforts and do whatever we could do."

Coda: Bitterness as a Pathway to an Authentic Educated Person

Throughout my time in the field, I have heard past and present volunteers talking about the sleepless nights that they spent in the rural high schools, in order to find the curriculum materials to teach and the activities that the group would do. When asked whether such nights were worth it, almost all of them said yes. A lot of them joked that, they themselves had never imagined that they would work this much for a *voluntary* program: at first, they thought they would just come over and teach what they had already prepared. The unexpected "bitterness," hence, was a surprising yet critical element to my informants.

As I have shown in this chapter, experiencing the "bitterness" and the values beneath is an integral element in their efforts of becoming an authentic Chinese person. In other words, the overseas-educated Chinese youths work through the program in a collective search for an ethical self. If in previous literatures, eating bitterness is for the purpose of toughening the individual child to survive in a competitive environment, both in China and beyond, my informants put such efforts into doing something *for the internal Others*, in order to fashion themselves as agents who counter the trend of losing morality in China (see Yan, 2014; Xu, 2017).

However, two curious questions remained unsolved from the above analyses. One was Hongyan's sarcastic tone when she commented on the busy WeChat messages. Since she previously worked as a volunteer, why did she not resonate with the "suffering" sentiment? Hongyan's sarcasm was not abnormal. There were another group of volunteers who expressed the same feelings to me after the volunteer program. What set them apart? Moreover, if the volunteers have worked this hard outside the classrooms for the purpose of teaching the students, what do the volunteers actually teach? Have they actualized the ideal of rural-oriented liberal arts education? Chapter 7 and chapter 8 of the dissertation will answer these questions respectively. Chapter 7 details the challenges that the volunteers encounter in their teaching, and Chapter 8 explains the diversity within the volunteers in detail.

Chapter 7: Teaching Cosmopolitanism: The Search for Authentic Education

Having discussed the experiential dimension of volunteering, in this chapter, I turn to discuss the volunteers' teaching efforts. The volunteers are asked to teach their Seminars and Community Exploration Projects with a project-based learning orientation, and to deliver TED Talk to the students for the purpose of sharing experiences. Weaving together interviews and the reflections on the program concluding forum, I describe the dilemmas that the volunteers encountered when enacting what they saw as genuine learning and education, and demonstrate the ideal strategies and learning outcomes of "authentic education" from the volunteers' perspective. Together, I show that the volunteers envision a curriculum that transcends national and cultural boundaries and their belief that such a curriculum is able to rehumanize education for the purpose of person-making in China. Embedded in this curriculum is the Chinese cosmopolitan ideal, as well as the Chinese view on teaching and learning.

Dilemmas in Enacting Authentic Education

I start with a volunteer's reflection on his teaching. After the conclusion of twenty-some sleepless days, the volunteers were reconvened in Changsha to reflect on their volunteering experience. On the forum about classroom teaching, especially the seminars, a lot of my informants discussed their struggles with regard to teaching. During

such a forum, Huipeng, who was then graduating from his undergraduate institution with a history major, posed a "five versus fifty" question, as below.

> In the "thank you" speech Bob Dylan gave for his Nobel Prize in Literature, he said that facing a fifty-people audiences is completely different from facing a five-hundred one. I feel the same. When I teach to a crowd of five, I could establish deep relationships with the students. Their eyes can tell me that they are listening. But when I teach fifty students, I feel like it's only me who get excited for what I am teaching… Well of course, there are perhaps five students listening… [But] When I teach poetry, Kant, and the Case of the Speluncean Explorers, I am happy even if there's only one person listening to me talking.
>
> So my question is, should we work towards giving more students access to the kind of education they don't have access to, or should we work towards teaching them things that they could eventually master?

In this brief reflection, Penghui talked about his conundrum: it was a dilemma between what he *should* teach and what he *would* teach. He felt that he should teach the liberal arts materials, because this was something that could broaden the students' minds, while he would also teach subjects that were related to the school curriculum because in this way, the students were able to benefit more from his teaching. The dilemma of deciding what to teach was ultimately transferred to a dilemma between liberal-arts education and the students' exam-based education. The ultimate question is, if the rural students are ultimately facing the National University Entrance Exam (NUEE), a testing mechanism that selects students based on test scores, and if the volunteers' intention were to "help" the students to do better at school, why is liberal arts material helpful and how to teach these materials so that they could be helpful for the students?

The conundrum that the volunteers faced was similar to a dilemma that teachers faced during one of the most influential educational reforms in 21st century China. With the state's drive to transform itself to a knowledge economy, its curriculum shifts from a

subject-centered, knowledge- and fact-centered and teacher-centered curriculum to an interdisciplinary, comprehensive, qualities-oriented, and student-oriented curriculum (see Lou, 2011; Wu, 2016). The goal was to alleviate the students' heavy academic burden from the exam pressures. However, this round of educational reform, also known as *suzhi* education, heavily stresses on urban-centered knowledge that is disconnected from the lives of the students themselves. Scholars have documented that rural students have become less interested in schooling due to such disconnection (Lou, 2011) and the implementation of *suzhi* education has, in effect, generated an audit culture amongst rural teachers themselves (Wu, 2016). In other words, the *suzhi* curriculum was a staged activity that does more harm than good to alleviating the academic burden of rural students. Many teachers hold that the new *suzhi* education is fundamentally opposed to the exam-based education, and that for the rural students, *suzhi* education adds more burden to the teachers and puts students in a disadvantaged position in the exam system as well.

Then do my informants situate their education on the other end of the spectrum? Do they see themselves doing "*suzhi* education" in order to help the students? Some of them said yes, as indicated in the "five versus fifty" conundrum Penghui raised in his reflections. Yet the majority of volunteers disagree, especially among those volunteers who studied in institutions in the United States. Below I describe the teaching strategies and materials that my informants resorted to in transcending this dichotomy.

Implementing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

The emphases on community participation is the most salient factor that sets the summer volunteer program apart from the rural students' everyday classes. This locally relevant orientation is seen in the organization's Community Exploration Projects (CEP), as well as the volunteers' attempts to create relatable lessons in their Seminars. The overall goal, according to the volunteers, was to have the students to find a sense of belonging to their hometowns, rather than thinking about the hometown as a place that needs to be left behind. Over the years, the cosmopolitan volunteers have conducted a wide range of projects. However, there are some community exploration projects that are deemed as successful and showcased to the other volunteers as authentic CEP projects, while some others are not. As I show below, the process of exploring community precisely lies in the volunteers' understanding about the word "community," and whether they are able to work with the students together in coming up with a project that explores the community in a way that is related to the students.

Paradoxes in Enacting Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Ever since the beginning of the online orientation, volunteers were asked to convey their ideas using culturally relevant knowledge. Echoing critical multicultural education scholars (for example, Postiglione, 1999; Lou, 2010; Wu, 2012), volunteers believe that, the best way to help students understand any idea is to use language and knowledge that students could connect to themselves. For them, to be able to step into the students' frame of mind is a virtue in teaching. However, doing so was always easier said than done. With limited knowledge about the country side and rural lives, the volunteers'

interpretation about rurality was usually confined to a few keywords, such as ethnic culture and farming. They were not familiar with the schooling trajectories that students with rural backgrounds went through either. As a result, when doing the Community Exploration Projects (CEP), "what is the community that they should explore" became a major question.

Hence, in actual practice, when the volunteers get started in this project, they think about examples that would spark student interests in conducting the project. As the curriculum handbook cites examples from textbooks from the United States, the understanding on what "community" is could be completely different from what the students can relate to. A prominent example is on the local ethnicity. Since a lot of the volunteers come from urban Han China, they are particularly interested in the architecture, clothing, music, language, and food of the ethnic minorities. In class, they steer the conversation toward these topics, and encourage students to think about the distinct facets of ethnic culture that they would like to explore or preserve in the project. Thus, in many Community Exploration Projects, the students put together projects about ethnic minority culture. Examples of these projects include, "On the features of the Buyi Song," "On the embroidery culture of the Buyi People," "On the Mountain Songs and ___ (a county's name)," "On the generational difference about drinking oil tea," etc.

However, projects as such do not generate much interest on the part of the students. For instance, in a group that originally intended to explore the architectural feature behind the Wind-and Rain Bridge[24] in the county, as the students were walking

---

[24] The Wind-and-Rain Bridge (also called roofed-bridges or flower-bridges) is typical to all villages, townships, and counties in ethnic Miao areas.

on the main street of the county, Yuming pointed to the newly renovated pavilions and told me that she thought the new decorations were ugly, and "couldn't even compare to those in her hometown. "Why do we need to do this?" Yuming asked me as we were walking under the burning heat of Hunan summer. She then asked the volunteers who led the group projects. As she heard from the volunteers about the value of "ethnic culture," she murmured, "oh ok." And then continued walking along.

Another way to approach the Community Exploration Projects is to focus on the social needs of the local county township. These projects highlight various issues of the county society. Examples include projects investigating the spatial distribution of the garbage bins in X area, the disorganization of street stalls, the parking violations in X county, etc. These projects appear so frequently to the point that in the alumni community, there is a running joke that "every year we always have to have one project on garbage can in at least one field-site." During the program concluding ceremony, when volunteers of each team bring the products of the student projects to share with other volunteer teams, these projects, along with the ethnic culture preservation projects, do not feature prominently in the discussion among the volunteers. When asked about the process of working on these projects, the volunteers were not excited either: some of them told me that they felt they themselves had learned a lot, but they were not sure how much the students got out of it; some cynical ones even told me that the CEP project took a lot of time, and they felt that they had to push themselves to carry the project through towards the end of the program.

Then what's the problem of exploring "community," a prime example of the Deweyan way of conceptualizing authentic education? Here, it is important to consider

the meaning of "community" vis-à-vis the students' growing up trajectories. Firstly, during the regular semesters, Changpu No. 1 High School runs an almost "prison-like" schedule (see Lou, 2011; Kipnis, 2011). A normal school day lasts from 6:50 a.m. to 10 p.m., including morning study periods, classes, and evening study periods. Due to the high pressure of the National University Entrance Exam, high schools add one and a half day to the five-day schedule, giving students only Sunday afternoons from 12 p.m. to 6 p.m. as "break time." During regular school weeks, students are not allowed to go beyond the school walls except for the six-hour break on Sundays. Students are allowed to go home during the monthly breaks, which usually lasts for two to three days. During these days, most of the students take buses to go to their hometowns in nearby townships and villages. In this way, students are largely confined within the school community, and are more familiar with life of their hometowns, rather than life in the county itself.

Taken this situation into consideration, a key premise of the CEP projects lies in the understanding that the students' everyday community might not be the same as the conceptualization of community as written in the handbooks. Modeled on the Western premises that community is a place-based island of "like-minded ideological spheres of sameness and security" (Abowitz, 1999, p.143), examples given in the handbooks are about the local food stalls, understanding the people on the central plaza of the county, etc. "Community" in its usage here is a concept "grounded in the nineteenth century in the uncertainties of a European social order undergoing rapid economic and social change" (Williams, 1976, p. 65). Therefore, while these examples could certainly motivate the students to be more observant and civic-minded about the county, it is hard for the students to generate more interest about the concept itself: in the mind of the

students, the relation between themselves and the "communities" were forced, rather than organic. Some students told me that when they were doing this project, they followed the instructions: the CEP projects were interesting because they could take the time they should have spent in classroom to go outside and "do nothing." The original goal of exploring the local community and having the students spot the beauty surrounding them was, therefore, lost in the instructions.

Exemplary Projects: Synthesizing Cosmopolitan Values with the "Community" of Students

Then what was the "authentic communities" that both the students and volunteers were proud of? Below, I turn to two examples that were seen as exemplary CEP projects. In these cases, the volunteers incorporated the students' views on their communities, and produced projects that promoted a sense of belonging among the students.

The first example comes from a group of Changpu students. A few days after I arrived at Changpu, a group of students came over to me, introducing themselves as former ZY Project students. Curious about their experiences in the program, I asked them the highlights of their experience. This group of students immediately said the CEP projects, saying that they had enjoyed doing their projects, and became proud of being a Changpu person after this project. Then they pulled out the laptop in Changpu ZY Space and showed their projects to me.

Entitled "A Story of Old Photos," Pengbo's group project narrates the history of Changpu No.1 High School through some old pictures. For the video, the group members connected with an alumnus who graduated from Changpu No. 1 High in the 1950s, and

interviewed him about his study experiences during the time when he was a student.

When I asked about the source of inspiration of their projects, the students told me that

they "got the inspirations with the older sisters mentoring their group." Then the old

sisters encouraged them to think about places and people that they found personal

relationship with, and to go out of the classroom building.

> So that day, in the afternoon, we thought we would interview some people in Changpu No.1 High first, partly because it was too hot and we were lazy, haha. We spotted an elder man, and then we decided to talk to him. As he spoke, we found out that he also graduated from Changpu No.1 High… By then, the elder sisters couldn't understand his words… you probably couldn't understand either. Only we could because he only spoke the Changpu dialect. We found out that he graduated from our high school fifty years ago…. As we recorded the interviews and reported to the volunteers, they said that we could explore the history of our high school in the project… We then wanted to take a look at the archival materials, which the school had in the archive room but were denied access to the students . The sisters negotiated with the school, and the school eventually let us in.

As Pengbo was speaking, the other volunteers at the same team watched the video again.

They began to be reminiscent about the project and the time that they spent with the

volunteers in the summer program. "That was the first time that we got to know the

history of our school. Hearing from the old grandpa talking about the glorious past of our

school really made me proud that I was from this school and belonged to this area. Has

anyone else [outside of ZY Project] watched the video? I want them to watch this too."

The way that Pengbo and his team narrated their CEP experiences was in sharp

contrast compared to the students who did projects such as the spatial distribution of

garbage bins and parking violations. In the 2016 final program concluding ceremony, the

projects that elicited other volunteers' interests were similar: in one CEP project, the

students told a story explaining their reasons of secretly escaping from the school gates

and the ways they do so. In the video, not only did the students courageously speak about their feelings of confinement within the school gates, but also, they filmed a videoclip explaining the usual routes to take. With the endorsement from the volunteers, the students also reached out to teachers in Changpu No.1 High, one of whom reluctantly responded to the interview questions. Towards the end, the group reasoned that the school did not provide enough entertainment options, which further pushed them out from the schoolyard gates. In the end, the CEP project resulted in the production of a video that voiced the students' views on the taboo behavior of escaping from the school wall. The closing remarks, written by the students, captured the students' views quite nicely:

> No matter how high the school wall is, it cannot bar the students from their want to escape from school and to not study. However, if the teachers could show more care for the students, if the society could love the students a bit more, then perhaps, the students don't need to think about escaping from school anymore.

A majority of the volunteers found this project intriguing, because it highlights the students' experience in the project. When I asked the volunteers in this group about the process of video production, Yan said that she primarily followed the lead of the students in her group, and supported their decision making process: "It was their idea and we provided technical help, for sure." She also encouraged the students to approach and interview teachers, and told them that they could "use ZY Project's name" if the teachers were not participating. Also, she also felt that the students did not challenge the "wall" concept towards the end of their storytelling; however, she let them write the script that they saw fit. In the end, this project was featured during the concluding ceremony, and won laughter and praise in the volunteer community. Similar projects that piqued the

students' interests include, understanding puppy love among high school students and beautifying the school through painting and stickers, etc.

Therefore, a critical difference between the projects on Changpu No.1 High school and the other CEP projects lie in the definition of "community." As seen in the previous two examples, the volunteers saw these projects as exemplary due to the close relationship between the students and the "community" that they explored. Hearing about these projects, a Chinese literary theory university professor who constantly advise ZY Project curriculum also commented that genuine community should be those that are closer to the mind of the students, and he gave another example of him interviewing the security guard of a county level high school. Hence, enacting the culturally relevant pedagogy underlying the CEP project requires the volunteers to synthesize local knowledge—"local" not only in the sense of the rural or the ethnic minority, but also, the mind of the students who have their own ways of seeing their everyday surroundings— with their cosmopolitan ideals such as the values of participation and empowerment.

The same definition of "community" also applies to the exemplary projects about ethnic culture. One team designed a school uniform with ethnic Miao elements, and was able to put their design into production due to the aid of the volunteers and with school officials' local contact. Another team of students interviewed a dyeing shop owner in town, drew the patterns of the design, and published a pattern manual for the shop owner. According to the volunteers, to this date, the students still remember the experience, and they feel that they have achieved the CEP's purpose.

This understanding of the community—local in the students' sense—is then related to Fei's articulation of the rural society. The projects that the volunteers deem as

exemplary differ from the "failed" projects because they lack an understanding about the concept of "community" in rural China. Here, Fei's (1992) theory on the foundation of Chinese society is helpful. In *From the Soil*, Fei explains that associations in the West are composed by individuals with similar minds, while in rural China, communities in China are formed through *differentiated relations.* That is, as individuals are first and foremost embedded in relation to the others, the boundaries of "association" are not clear cut, and are usually defined through relationships such as kinship, property, and friendships. Translated into Chinese, the term *shequ* (社区, community, association) is a protean concept that relates to law and administration, such as the gated, physical middle-class residential community in urban China (Tomb, 2009; Zhang, 2002). In this sense, the exemplary projects synthesized Chinese reality with the culturally relevant pedagogy originated from the volunteers' foreign educational experiences.

Creating Genuine Student Participation

To let the students speak up in classes is certainly one of the major goals of ZY Project's summer program. Recognizing that in the students' everyday classrooms, the local high school teachers usually lecture and teach to the textbooks, the volunteers hope to create opportunities where the students engage in open discussions and co-construct conversations with the teachers in class. Yet this goal is easier to say than to accomplish. As much as my informants were idealistic about engaging students' knowledge in the classroom, they told me that their Seminar classrooms were filled with embarrassing

moments. They used a phrase, "*ga liao*" (尷聊),[25] literally translated as embarrassing or awkward chats, when describing their teaching experience. As I asked where the embarrassing or awkward feeling came from, almost all of them pointed to the awkward silence that was constantly present in class. How to encourage the students to participate in class became one of the major issues the volunteers had to deal with in class.

A primary reason that their classrooms were silent lies in the volunteers' inexperienced instructions. All of them recognized the importance of "inviting the students into the classes," as this was what authentic education should be. Moreover, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the volunteers valued feedback from the students a lot: as soon as the volunteers heard from the students saying their classes were "boring," they would work extra hard so that they could liven up the classrooms better. Yet as much as the volunteers knew and tried to pose open-ended questions, as the orientation had emphasized, they failed to elicit student participation due to their inexperience in teaching: some did not explain the dense materials they provided to the students; some others repeatedly asked overly broad questions such as "what do you think." It is not surprising that the students were at loss when it was their turn to speak up in class.

Paradoxes in Encouraging Student Participation

A primary way to encourage student participation in class was to create small group and large group work. Recognizing that teacher-centered classrooms were full of teacher's lecturing without considering student interest, the volunteers also hoped to

---

[25] "Ga" was a popular phrase during the time I conducted fieldwork. It is shortened from *gan ga* (尷尬).

adapt some of their teaching materials to the interest of the students. Some volunteers resorted to changing their teaching plans, replacing original material with what the students demanded in class. Some others decided to include "eye-catching" materials in class, such as narrating the dating history of the great composer Tchaikovsky. While this strategy did cater to the students' interest, the majority of the volunteers did not see these methods as genuinely educational either. They saw these practices as divergent from their original teaching goals. For example, Guawa specifically commented on another volunteer's change of lesson plans in response to students' interest: "you are spoiling them too much! Our goal here is to teach, but not to *excite the students for nothing*. We want the students to learn something…" The student interest generated in this way was not deemed as a genuine part of the educational project.

Yet with their hope of creating truly student-centered, participatory classrooms, the volunteers made much effort orienting the students to speak up in class. A male volunteer, Qiqiu, shared his reflections:

> I taught a seminar on legal systems in China. I really wanted them to talk. So following advice shared by previous volunteers, I wanted to make use of the silent, awkward pauses so that students would know these were their chance of speaking up in class. However, at one point, I let one of the students stand up in class for *about thirty minutes* altogether, yet he still wouldn't talk. I didn't know what to do actually.
>
> Yet when I read their homework [the reflection or question essays], I realized that those who didn't talk were the students who had a lot of thoughts on their minds. I noticed that there were a lot of students who could actually write a lot. So I told myself that, I would respond as much as they write to me. At one time, one silent student wrote three pages. I needed to write that much as well, even if I had to awkwardly write for the sake of producing three pages.[26] I learned that they really had a lot to talk about; what they could not do was to find the correct words to talk about what was on their minds…. I feel that I need to figure out a way to

---

[26] The phrase he used here was *ga xie* (尬写).

"open" up each student.

In this reflection, Qiqiu narrated how his view on student participation has changed. At first, he thought that student talking and answering questions could indicate that students were actively participating in class. Then, as he read the students reflections, he realized that not talking did not mean that the students were not listening; the purpose of student participation was to have the students learn from their classroom instructions, but not talking only for the sake of talking. Another volunteer told me that she had stopped trying to make everyone talk as the only way to make them participate. "Only talking is so superficial; it's not genuine."

Modeling for the Students

Moreover, Qiqiu also spoke about his strategy to elicit student participation in the seminar: he decided to respond to the homework essays thoroughly, to the extent that he had to write as much as the students. Although this was a chore, as he said that he "had to awkwardly write three pages for the sake of producing three pages," Qiqiu believed that this was the best way to show the student that he "care[d] about them and t[ook] their work seriously." It was the volunteers' hope that such a pedagogy from their heart could encourage the students to talk more and participate more in class.

The strategy of "modeling for the students" appears frequently in the field reflections of the volunteers. In this way, the task of eliciting genuine participation was transformed into work on themselves. Take Guawa as an example. During an evening debrief meeting at the field-site, the volunteers had a heated discussion about the most effective strategies to open up the students. After the team heard about the students' good

comments about Guawa's Seminar, they were all eager to hear from Guawa about "what

on earth have you [has she] done" when she taught. Guawa, a girl whose seminar topic

was Classic and Contemporary Opera, shared her strategies.

> We ourselves just have to be excited in class first and let the students see it [the
> excitement]. My Seminar is on English Musicals. In the previous two sessions,
> my classroom was too silent. They didn't understand my point [the difference
> between musicals and operas]. I thought that I could lead them to perform these
> out and feel the difference. But at first, they were too shy and they would only
> stand in front of the classroom and read the scripts out. Then I gave them an
> example: I laid down on the floor first in front of them. They all laughed at me.

As she was talking about how she decided to loosen herself up, the other volunteer

commented that students in her seminar almost all recalled the "Sister Guawa laying on

the floor" episode, and said that they became less nervous after seeing this. Hearing this,

Guawa responded, "yeah, the key was to shorten the distance between us and the students

and they will answer your questions for sure." The other volunteers then followed

Guawa's suit in class: some performed short skits in a Seminar on crosstalk;[27] some

played piano in a choir Seminar; for those who taught Seminars on humanity subjects,

they told me that they themselves just pretended to be excited during the time they came

into the class.

Guawa's strategy of putting herself forward first was commonly mentioned

during the concluding ceremony. When I asked the volunteers how they treated the

"silence" in their student-centered teaching practices, most of them joked to me that "one

of the teaching techniques [they] acquired was to learn how to *ga high* (literally translated

---

[27] Crosstalk, also known as *Xiangsheng*, is a traditional Chinese comedic performing art
form. It is typically in the form of a conversation between two performers.

as "embarrassingly getting high)." "Otherwise how can we expect the students to be interested in what we teach?" One female volunteer asked this rhetorical question when the volunteer group was discussing this topic. In getting excited themselves first, the volunteers hoped that they could enliven the atmosphere in the classroom so that they could pull the students into their classrooms. In their minds, they should not change the original course materials, no matter what they were. The key was to have the students get interested in the materials from their hearts. For this purpose, they themselves had to embody what the ideal was: to get excited themselves was the best example according to this view.

In the Chinese views on teaching and learning, imitation is the key to the occurrence of natural learning. In a classic study on Chinese teacher preparation, Paine (1990) observes Chinese teacher preparation and their teaching, and argues that the ideal role of the teacher is one of virtuoso: teachers are supposed to be knowledgeable about the school subject and to possesses a teaching heart (a commitment to teaching well, a seriousness of purpose, a willingness to work in groups, and a concern for the others). What combines these two aspects of virtuosity is "performance" in class: the class becomes something like an audience, while the teacher performs teaching activities as an art. Paine's explanation of the Chinese view of teaching and learning is worth quoting in length,

> … teaching is often referred to as *shang jiang tai* (上讲台, literally translated as "getting up at the lecture stand"); teaching involves much of the dynamic of actor, stage, and audience. The excellent teacher is one who performs for the class as a whole and is able to reach the whole group. The virtuoso impresses and affects the audience. The virtuoso certainly interprets and responds to the feel of the audience, yet the chief activity—the teaching act—does not alter for individual members in the auditorium. The teacher is the one performing, the one in charge… (The

audience cannot really know the show is over until the performer makes it clear.) (p.54).

In the quote above, Paine uses the metaphor of performance to describe Chinese teaching activities. According to Chinese teachers, teaching is an art that requires the "accomplishment of the necessary knowledge of their subject and some personal teaching aesthetic" (Paine, 1990, p.54). To become a virtuoso, student teachers are coached by experienced teachers, and practice teaching is considered a ritual of initiation. Chinese educators believe that the virtuosos are able to achieve some "grace and beauty that transports the students" (Paine, 1990, p. 71-72).

What Paine documents here is the importance of exemplarity in the theory of Chinese teaching and learning. More recent studies on Chinese education (Bakken, 2000; Kipnis, 2011; Kuan, 2015) extend this analysis and write that, as teachers are part of the state education system, exemplarity also signifies a certain extent of governance and control. By asking the students to imitate the teacher/leader, educators, and the state system by and large, deny students opportunities to question the ways of the teacher.

Considering this Chinese understanding of teaching and learning helps us understand the strategies that volunteers used in eliciting student participation. Narratives such as "getting excited themselves first" and "writing as much as what the students have written" reflect their belief that the students could follow their example in class. They also hoped to show their care towards the students through modeling and writing. They would do what they hoped the students to do first, in order to elicit genuine participation. In other words, the volunteers hope to *embody* the ideal of talking and participating in class for the students to see. The emphasis on "showing care for the students" is also

reflected in the virtuoso model: many volunteers refer to these students not as *xuesheng* (学生, "student") but as their *wa* (娃) or *haizi* (孩子), both meaning "children." The relationship they hoped to establish was one with care: my informants often criticized the teachers in regular classrooms as not caring for the students enough. Embedded in my informants' narrative, therefore, is the virtuoso and exemplarity model.

What sets my informants' vision of "good classroom" apart from the above virtuoso model is student participation. An ideal classroom should include student participation and student voices and should engage with the community that is meaningful to the student themselves. In creating such a classroom, however, they unconsciously evoke concepts such as exemplarity and virtuoso for such a classroom.

The Belief in the Cosmopolitan "Useless Knowledge"

One other distinct feature of the education in ZY Project's program is its emphasis on the liberal arts materials. With the volunteers' ideal of teaching cosmopolitan materials, they proposed to teach topics and course materials that are liberal arts oriented, such as European history, Chinese literature, etc. When I asked why reading Rousseau was helpful for the students to do better in school after the summer program, my volunteers reasoned that knowledge in the great books was for "character formation" and for "inspirations." They have also critiqued the "outcome-based" educational approach, as embedded in PBL, arguing that true learning does not need to be quickly materialized into anything. In other words, it is the volunteers' belief in the "useless, liberal arts knowledge" that could realize their ideal of authentic education.

Dilemmas in the Outcome-Based Approach

One of the mandates in integrating PBL into the curriculum is the focus on the tangible outcomes generated from the classrooms. Taking various forms, the outcomes are then supposed to be archived for the organization, presented to the local interested teachers and school officials, and also, to the community residents. Many volunteer teams decided to put together a program celebration ceremony, in which they asked the students to "present" what they had learned and produced in the summer program. They reasoned that having the students to showcase what they had learned would help to boost their confidence, as well as to have the others, such as teachers and local residents, know about what the program had achieved.

However, the PBL approach was not without controversy. While the volunteers reported that having students doing presentations could help to involve students into the teaching and learning process, and thus motivate the students in classroom discussions, they also reported the dilemma they encountered due to the requirement of student "outcomes," especially in the liberal arts oriented Seminars. For instance, a girl who taught a seminar on classical music appreciation did not know what to do with the student presentation project, and ended up coming up with a student choir performance. She said that she felt that such a "presentation" was not authentic because it did not reflect the intended message: to teach the students to appreciate the beauty of classical symphonies. Other volunteers also said that they had to sacrifice time of class content in order to rehearse for the student "presentation." Yiming, who taught a seminar on different literary constructions of a hero in *Green Snake*, a well-known Chinese folktale story, said that she set aside time to prepare for the final presentation, which ended up being a staged

performance of a short excerpt of the story. She also complained that students ended up spending much of their time reciting the lines and rehearing the performance. Given the limited amount of time that she had for the seminar, she found it challenging to design a presentation that both embodied key messages about literature and would also "look like a presentation." Therefore, in the eyes of the volunteers, the emphasis on outcomes in the PBL approach made them derail from the original, liberal arts materials they intended to teach.

Yet it is interesting to note that here, the reason that the volunteers complained about the presentation requirement was not because they didn't want the students to be part of the knowledge construction process; rather, they complained because they saw the presentations as something oriented to the *others*, i.e., to an audience who would watch the students' learning outcomes. Thus, my informants, along with their students, devoted time and effort on *rehearsing* the presentations in order to present the best "work" as they could. Presentations, hence, turned out to be more like performances. Bakkan's (2000) critical analysis on the Chinese education system mentions this point. He points out that in the Chinese language, there is not a direct translation of "presentation": the closest translations are *zhanshi* (展示) and *biaoyan* (表演), both of which carry the connotations of showing something to other people so that they could know about it. *Zhan* means to unfold, and *shi* means to manifest or to show; *biaoyan* is related more to performance (see Bakkan, 2000, p. 419). Therefore, "presentation" in the Chinese context is more about showcasing and performing. It was reasonable that the "presentations" became performances for the *others*, the audiences of the performance, rather than about the students themselves.

This "performing for the others" orientation was particularly disturbing for my informants. During the program concluding ceremony, as the volunteers were discussing the dilemmas on presentations in the Seminars, Rao Hei, an alumnus who spent several years working in ZY Project before it became a Chinese NGO, openly criticized "presentation" in this way:

> Presentations are always for the others. But how much can we really present to others? How much of our knowledge cannot be presented? The real knowledge we could ever acquire is what lingers on in our hearts. Isn't the most important time we spent in college the time that we went back home and read books on our own?

Rao Hei points to one of the key belief of authentic learning among my informants, that is, knowledge acquisition is meaningful for person-making. Below I explicate this belief in details.

"Learning to Become a Better Person" through the Great Books

I first turn to a vignette in class. Yanran, a soon-to-be freshman and a philosophy major in an elite American university, was reaching the end of her "Learning how to Study" Core Ability seminar. During the first forty minutes of the class, she followed the lesson plan provided by ZY Project. The material emphasized the theoretical background behind effective studying strategies and also introduced the famous format of note-taking. Yet as soon as Yanran approached the end of the class, she gave a lecture to the students about the value of learning. She told the students:

> The take-away message that I want to tell you is that, the most important knowledge that you have to acquire is precisely what is left unsaid in the textbooks. Of course it is important to think about school as it is related to earning

a good salary; however, it's up to you to decide whether you want to accept this definition or not. What the elder brothers and sisters are doing here is to lead you to know that there is such thing called self-learning. We all want to resist the pressure and anxieties that the real life has given us, so as to search for a better self. We need to reflect on ourselves so that we could harvest changes for this better self. [I want to tell you that] we need to find our passion and to work for this passion for the rest of our lives.

Yanran's eyes were sparking with passion when she was saying these words to the students. Later after class, she told me that she taught those "techniques" that the curriculum handbook listed because she had to do so. Yet what she wanted to tell the students about "education" itself was that "knowledge" and "learning" has its intrinsic value that could not be verbally explained. Such intrinsic values could not be attained without the motivations from one's heart, and the end goal of acquiring such motivations was the betterment of the self as a human being.

What Yanran would like to convey here was her understanding about the philosophy of learning. She problematized the equation of learning to knowledge acquisition—the idea that going to school was for the purpose of doing well in the exams, then being admitted to a better university and earning more money. Rather, Yanran would like her rural students to understand that authentic learning should bring changes to themselves. In other words, learning should be for the sake of the self.

This particular understanding of learning is rooted in a Confucian understanding on learning. *Xue er wei ji* (学而为己), translated as "learning for the sake of the self," is one of the key tenets of the Confucian interpretation of education. Here, the self should not be interpreted in an individualist term; the self is understood as the sum of the relations in which a person is embedded. In other words, perfecting the self is also

perfecting the family, the nation, then the cosmos (Tu, 1984). Learning is always a self-related activity that has deep effects in bringing about changes to the world.

This interpretation of the purpose of learning corresponds to the volunteers' critiques of the Chinese state-education system. In particular, they argue that even if the students do well in the National University Entrance Exam, the university degrees that they would eventually receive are of little educational value. Their observation is similar to what Fong (2004) has observed in China: as the numbers of job seekers with higher education degrees increased, Chinese employers raise the bar of minimum educational qualification requirements. Good jobs become more and more elusive, as diplomas, expectations, and consumption demands skyrocket (Fong, 2004, p.88). Sometimes employers look for college degrees when hiring for menial positions such as restaurant waiters (Kuan, 2008, p.101). As most of the rural students in county level high schools would qualify for second-tier universities in China, my informants always comment that the curriculum and training offered by such universities are of "low quality" and it would simply "squander the four years of time." For instance, Fengkuai, a first year philosophy major told me that, "this [going to a second-tier university] means that the diplomas the students receive would remain credentials only." Fengkuai further states, "one's knowledge of one plus one equals two doesn't necessarily lead to one's ability to shop in the street markets. Although they [the students] won't be able to understand what I teach right now and don't know why such knowledge is going to be *useful*... I know that such knowledge is going to be part of their character and useful for career development and future lives."

Imparting knowledge in the liberal arts traditions, then, is my informants' attempt of bringing back the humanistic way of education, which has been long lost due to the intense pressure in the Chinese exam-oriented state education system. In fact, keen observers of Chinese educational system have written about this extensively, especially Chinese scholars. Zhao (2016) published a collection of essays that argue for the importance of person-making through education. In her book, Zhao and her colleagues describe the rise of credentialism in the Chinese educational system, leading to the dehumanizing way of schooling in current exam-based education. They further state that modern Chinese education has been built upon a superficial and instrumental embracing of Western modernity, without adequate attention to Chinese cultural heritage. Just as these scholars argue, my informants hope to bring to the rural student liberal arts materials and teach the students to appreciate the "intrinsic beauty of knowledge."

My informants believe that teaching liberal arts materials benefits the students because this could help them understand the fun and beauty of the very act of studying. To this end, they selected their great books, including the Western canons (Homer, Shakespeare, Kant) and also Chinese ones (*Dreams of the Red Chamber, Green Snakes*) to teach in twenty days. While I acknowledge the elitism embedded in this ambitious selection (see Khan, 2012), what my informants hoped to achieve was to give rural students intellectual access to these books. They believed that this kind of material was the "missing-link" in the Chinese educational reforms. A volunteer who had taught both math lessons and philosophy lessons wrote in his reflection that, "teaching math was to give them clearer guidance [on the tests], while teaching the 'other things' was for the sake of unconsciously forming the students' characters." As he further reasons that "the

latter is more difficult to achieve anyways," he believes that he would continue teaching liberal arts materials, despite that he knows "this wouldn't yield too much outcome."

The ideal of transcending the dichotomy between exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education then leads the volunteers to be less concerned with the short-term outcomes of their teaching efforts. Using the words of ZY Project senior advisor and also a literary theory professor in China, what the volunteers are doing is "planting seeds and lightening candles" amidst the "dark reality" in China. In a program concluding ceremony, he told the volunteers that "you [they] should believe in the impacts that you [they] are making… because the seeds will grow when they come into the right kind of soil." He continued to say that, "if the [national] educational system remains unchanged, increasing test scores does not contradict the liberal arts orientation at all" because "it takes time for the seeds to grow, and that it is the future that the younger generation [the volunteers] are constructing."

Hence, to my informants, teaching the great books is the appropriate way of doing education, because it transcends the dichotomy between exam-oriented education and *suzhi* education. Teaching Homer is important because it inspires the students and forms their characters; teaching fact-based subjects, such as English and math, could help the students advance in the state-education system. Both are helpful for the rural student to become an authentic human being.

Returning to the Cosmopolitan Ideal: Compiling Rural-Oriented Textbooks

(*Xiangtu Jiaocai*, 乡土教材)

My informants' ambition to create a truly authentic education does not stop here. In fact, after a few years of trial and error teaching the "great books" to the rural students, Niu Huang told me that what he *really* wanted to do was to write a set of *xiang tu* textbooks that would document the rich history and the diverse ways of being in Hunan and Guangxi areas. Sitting in the Beijing headquarter office, when Niu Huang was reviewing the curriculum guide for the CEP project, one day, I asked him about the garbage bin projects and the ethnic clothing projects that grew out from CEP. I was also curious about what he thought about the use of "high culture materials" in the volunteers' proposed seminars. Surprisingly, Niu Huang told me that these were not ideal in his mind, and what he had always wanted to do was history projects that could document the rituals in the Chinese rural lives. He showed me a few photocopies of the local gazetteers of the counties of ZY Project field-sites, and asked me in an ironic way, "but who [the youngsters] would read these before setting out to explore the community?" Flipping through these thick gazetteers in archaic style printing, he told me he had always wanted to compile the local folklores and oral history materials for the purpose of cultural preservation and also for educational use in the local classrooms. When I asked why he had not done so, Niu Huang responded that he "didn't know whether he was the right person to do it" because he "didn't have much authority." He said so because he thought he didn't have enough knowledge about such traditions, especially since he knew that the current ethnicity designation was a product of the Chinese state's attempt to classify the population during the . In other occasions, he said that he had hoped to learn from student

projects about rural culture, and then gather enough materials for this ambitious project. It was clear that he had always been searching for the kind of "authentic" knowledge that he had hoped to find: he joked to me that, "the way we learn about Homer now is not about the real Homer anymore, because it is already a translated text of the original poem, and the original poetic value of Homer in Homeric Greek has been lost in the translation process." In another WeChat conversation, Niu Huang told me that the ideal kind of local-oriented PBL project would be "to write a story about their hometowns using the poetic style of narration in Homer, or that they could read Homer parallel to the *Panwang Da Ge,* a Yao ethnic song that was similarly important in the construction of Yao people's history and cosmology." This kind of project is what rural-oriented, culturally relevant educational material should entail.

Another example comes from Rao Hei, a ZY Project alumni who left ZY Project due to his dissatisfaction with the skill-based discourse and the more recent outcome orientation. During a sharing session, he gave an example of what he believes as the ideal lesson plan:

> I went to Liuzhai (a field-site) the other year, and I didn't know what I should explore actually. So we [Rao Hei and his group of students] just went out, mindlessly walking around in the hope of finding something to explore. I didn't want to do garbage projects with the student [laugh]… As we were walking, we found a weird-looking house, whose name was *Changshou gong*, "Palace of Longevity," We thought well this was pretty interesting: why was there a Daoist temple in Guizhou Province in the middle of many Miao huts? So we went into the place and talked to the people in it, then got to know that it used to be a *Jiangxi Huiguan* (江西会馆, translated as "meeting hall for [people from] Jiangxi"). The temple was built in the early days of Emperor Guangxu [1870s]. So then we went to find the county gazetteer, realizing that there were ethnic Miao rebellions during the years that immediately preceded. Then a student told us that, he once heard from elders in his family saying that the family moved from Jiangxi to Guizhou. Then another student followed with a similar story. Then we realized that the reason the temple was here might be related the rise of Taiping

Heavenly Kingdom and the migration of Jiangxi people as a consequence of the war. The relocated people from Jiangxi settled here at the Miao frontier, and irritated the Miao people who rebelled against them. The people from Jiangxi built this house for self-defense and socialization. So we ended up doing an oral history project with the elders of the students' families and linking this project with the information in high school history textbooks…

What was commendable, according to Rao Hei, was how this project grew out from a casual discovery of an ignored yet historically significant monument in the local area, and connected the personal life of the students to the monument, and also to textbook knowledge that the students needed to master. He thought that this activity exemplified the kind of authentic education that the volunteers should strive for.

Coda: Enacting Authentic Education in a Neoliberal Age

Existing scholarship on the status quo of contemporary Chinese K-12 education has largely focused on the marginalizing effects of the standard national curriculum for the ethnic minority and rural students in China (Lou, 2011; Wu, 2012, 2016). Scholars have called for localized curriculum, culturally relevant pedagogy, and teacher education reform in order to foster equal access and educational outcome. However, given the strong influence of the National University Entrance Exam, the national policies that continuously devalue "peasant" status (Kipnis, 2011), and urban, middle-class Chinese people's drive for "first-world citizenship" (Anagnost, 2004; Fong, 2011), implementing the new curriculum and pedagogies has met with resistance on various fronts, including teachers and the students themselves. The structural constraints that rural teachers and educators face leave little leeway for them to counter the educational divide within the system.

As what I have shown in this chapter, ZY Project volunteers come to rural schools with their ideal of enacting an authentic education that is cosmopolitan in nature. Entailed in this cosmopolitan model are a few key elements: exploring meaningful community from the student perspective, fostering genuine participation beyond "speaking up," and believing in the intrinsic value of the "great books." Embedded in the exemplary projects of the "meaningful community" are the organizing principles of Chinese society, and behind the exemplary teaching method is the Chinese belief that education is about one's cultivation to become a better person, who is able to create a better community. Such beliefs allow these volunteers to construct an educational model that bypasses the various dichotomies in the contemporary Chinese discourse about education, such as the rural vs. the urban, student-centeredness vs. teacher-centeredness. In other words, the ideal educational model that emerges from their practices is rooted in the Chinese understanding of teaching and learning, and has synthesized what my informants consider valuable based on their oversea educational experiences.

Moreover, the ideal educational model attempts to democratize the highest kind of knowledge, which, in their minds, does not only include the Western canons. Rather, it attempts to equally value the local knowledge, both the Chinese classical tradition and the everyday knowledge in the lives of the students. They refuse to submit to the state education system due to its current instrumentalist and materialist orientation; rather, in the short amount of time, my informants hope to enact a model of cosmopolitan education without having to be concerned about the outside social structures. As this education takes place in the rural side of China, the rural students, rural knowledge, and rural schools are all part of the construction of this ideal.

Lastly, it is curious to note that, although the organization has adopted the skill-based and outcome-oriented approach, the volunteers did not emphasize these in their teachings. Those volunteers who focused too much on student participation and the final presentations were considered as not "understanding the vision of ZY Project." How do these non-followers see ZY Project, its people, and its educational model? I turn to the perspectives of the "non-followers," whose narratives reveal the privileged nature of the cosmopolitan ideal and the moral significance of volunteering activities in contemporary China.

Chapter 8: Elitism and Careerism: Questioning the Cosmopolitan Ideal

As I have shown in previous chapters, the ideal of alleviating rural-urban

educational inequality has brought ZY Project from an online community to a registered

NGO in a provincial city in China, produced numerous challenges for the volunteers to

overcome, and formed a utopian cosmopolitan community between the rural, the urban,

and the foreign. In this chapter, I turn to the stories of a few who were completely

disillusioned by such cosmopolitan ideal. Different from the practices of *jie di qi*, they

cynically describe themselves as "coarsely earthy/soiled" (*tu bie,* 土鳖), and are also

very cynical about the organization's educational model as well as the *jie di qi* practice.

Hence, I tell their stories, including their experiences in the program and their critiques.

I write these stories in detail for a few reasons. Firstly, I illustrate the different

reasons that they are not sympathizing with the *jie di qi* ideal, showing how this ideal

forms part of a new middle-class *suzhi* status. This middle-class status entails factors such

as places of origin, educational backgrounds, and the extent to which one is

knowledgeable about the Great Books. Secondly, since some of my informants are

equally well-read in social theory, and have already been analyzing the works of the

organization following sociological structural critiques, I show how their

conceptualization of self is different from the malleable ideal. Lastly, their stories also

illustrate the significance of NGO groups in the contemporary Chinese moral landscape

"Isn't This Just a Game They Put Together to Touch Their Own Hearts…"

Here, let me return to the "sacrifice" comment by Hongyuan. Finishing up her undergraduate degree in Journalism and Communication in a second-tier university in China, Hongyuan was one of the senior volunteers who stayed on site to help with and oversee the summer program in Changpu No.1 High. By the time of the summer program, she has already worked in the ZY Fellow program for four months, during which time she and I shared a dorm room in Changpu No.1 High School. Hongyuan had an interest in studying Folkloristics, a sub-field of anthropology in Chinese graduate schools after she received her Bachelor's degree, so she asked me a lot of questions about the discipline in general. Due to the exam and application timeline, Hongyuan decided to take a year off to prepare for the national graduate school examinations. Therefore, after finishing her tenure as a long-term volunteer, Hongyuan decided to stay in Changpu during the summer. During the summer program and another special program that Hongyuan and I observed together, after the exhausting days, half of the times, she came back to the dorm talking to me about how she saw these volunteers as too "baby-like." One night, when she and I were imagining the crying scenes that would inevitably happen when the volunteers depart from Changpu, she sarcastically commented, "well I don't feel these sentiments anymore. Isn't the entire thing just a game they put together to touch the heart of themselves (自己感动自己的游戏)?"

What does Hongyuan mean by the "game"? Who is included in this "they" and who is not? Why can't Hongyuan resonate with the sentiments that are so prevalent in the circle of volunteers? Throughout my time in the field, a lot of volunteers have come over to me and complained about their fellow peers. Working equally hard as the others, these

189

volunteers complained that they found themselves *not* belonging to the organization, that they felt that they were dwarfed compared to their volunteer colleagues, or that such activities were "meaningless." Some even told me that they would not volunteer again in the near future. In what follows, I unpack the critiques using the stories of two similar volunteers.

Pangpu: Desperately Searching for an "Elite School Status"

I first turn to the story of Liu Pangpu, a first year student majoring in industrial design in a second-to-top art institution in Beijing by the time he participated in the summer program. A passionate volunteer at the beginning, Pangpu was not able to put himself into the volunteer program due to an institutional divide between him and his teammates. As his story with the rural teachers and the cosmopolitan volunteers unfolds, I show how he attributed one external factor—his educational background—as the primary reason of his failure in volunteering.

Growing up in a small city in Guangdong Province and having been studying as an art student in high school, Pangpu was exceptional in art, but not in other academic subjects.[28] Graduated as an art-tracked student, he was admitted to a university whose art majors are ranked as the top in China. In 2016, he was accepted by ZY Project as a summer volunteer. He was passionate about what was to come in the rural schools, especially when thinking about how he could "teach the local children something."

---

[28] In China, students who choose to specialize in art enroll in preparation courses for about nine months (after the end of Grade 11 and the first semester of Grade 12). In the admission process, the cut-off scores of art-track students are much lower than the academic-track ones. As a result, there is a general perception that the art-track students are less intellectually competent than the academic-track students.

Moreover, he was also excited that ZY Project had "given me [him] the opportunity to meet these wonderful new friends." As soon as he got to know that the principal of the school that he'd be working in was very supportive for ZY Project's efforts, he said that he felt lucky, and was fully energized for the upcoming volunteer work with his teammates.

Yet Pangpu was disappointed, not by the students or the school, but by the people who he happened to be working with. Coincidentally enough, Pangpu was assigned to work with a team of volunteers from Tsinghua, an Ivy League university that hosts the second to best art school in China. The only other volunteer who was not from that university was Huo Tuichang, a returning volunteer studying psychology at a liberal arts college in the U.S.. As all the other members came from the same university and had already known each other prior to the program, Pangpu and Tuichang quickly became good friends and talked to each other a lot.

The first reason that led to Pangpu's disappointment was about his teaching, particularly in comparison with his teammates, while the other reason was about the behaviors of the teammates. He was disappointed about his classroom, because he failed to make the students speak up despite his attempts to "satisfy the desire of the students." He complained that the classrooms of his teammates focused too much on their own conceptualization rather than paying attention to the students, and that they were borrowing too much material from foreign sources (such as the PBL framework, the icebreakers, the audio/visual materials from English websites such as YouTube and Bie.org). He didn't want to do the same. Specifically, he completely overhauled his Seminar, teaching 10th grade Politics textbook, based on what his students requested in

191

class. "They didn't listen to me at all… and they were just curious about my relationship history." He told me so after his Politics textbook reading session. He further said that, when he asked the students if they had more questions to ask him, they asked him about his personal relationship, so he "disclosed my[his] dating histories." Pangpu felt puzzled by the students' curiosities, as he thought that his mission in the rural area should be teaching. Later that day, he sent me a message, saying, "I'm not that happy today. I feel like this entire thing [teaching the students] is so fake, and it's not doing what it claims to be doing. I have been reflecting what I have been doing [as a volunteer], and what on earth I am doing."

Pangpu's change of teaching materials is worthy of discussion. Unlike his peers, he changed his plan from teaching something outside of the students' education to teaching textbooks, the materials that students had to face during the regular school years. In other words, his change of materials signals his move from an education outside the state-based educational model to the school curriculum. Moreover, his criticism on ZY Project's educational model largely stemmed from his perceived failures in enacting ZY Project's curriculum: he felt that his efforts did not result in the ideal outcome, i.e. student engagement. He felt that he "didn't have much to share" when it came to his turn to talk about personal experiences, and he didn't feel it was a form of education. ZY Project's education, the education outside the state education system, was not something that he identified with, while he found the politics textbook to be meaningful, since those materials could help students move further within their educational trajectory. What he saw as valuable for both the students and himself was to get a better education and to

move to the center of the "global" in the moral geography. Pangpu was disillusioned by the cosmopolitan educational ideal.

What was more devastating to Pangpu was his teammates, whom he referred to as "those volunteers in that top art school." When the program was still taking place, Pangpu repeatedly told me that he felt his peers spent too much time "enjoying themselves." What he meant was that, he felt that the volunteers have spent too much time dining with the school principal, who was very supportive of the organization's work. Local to the township, Principal Fu invited the team to dine with other school officials and teachers for a few times. The purpose of these banquets was to "show the hospitality of the locals" especially considering that the volunteers were doing free work for his students. In Hunan, as in many other provinces, it is impolite not to serve alcoholic drinks (mostly hard liquor) at banquets, while the guests should drink at least a sip to show respect to the hosts. On these dining tables, Pangpu shouldered this responsibility, as he was one of the two team leaders. After a few dinners, Pangpu told me that he got tired of the drinking and toasting. He was sick of the "meaningless talks of bureaucratism at dinner banquets… I could do it, but this is really not the time to have fun. I am more interested in what we could offer to the students; but I feel like we are not offering anything."

Three days later, Pangpu told me that he was physically not well due to too much alcohol intake over the dinner table. He was also mentally exhausted because of a fight he had with the curriculum team leader, whom he described as "one of those [in that top art school]." He was dissatisfied with a volunteer playing badminton with the students during regular class time, and yelled at the volunteer because he thought she was not

doing what she should have been doing. Talking to me over the phone, Pangpu complained, "What are they doing? Do they even know? To treat the volunteers as human beings is to be cruel to the students. I have put myself into the shoes of the students, and changed my reading materials to their textbooks [as the students requested]. Just because they [the volunteers] are tired, they could blame the students [for not engaging in the classes]? There are a few in that particular university that think like this, and they take it for granted that this is the right thing to do. I am packing my things. I want to quit. Fuck it, I can't face *these people* anymore…"

Pangpu did not quit the team however. During the rest of his volunteer time, he refused to talk to any other volunteers except for Tuichang: in his eyes, those who were "from that school" came to the rural school to enjoy the banquets, the attention from rural students, and get to "show off" their knowledge, skills, and most importantly, the "top university student" label that they carried with them when facing the students. Until the end of the program and to this date, Pangpu still referred to his teammates as "those in Tsinghua." He was so annoyed by how his teammates behaved that he did not keep any relationship with them. Pangpu felt that these people only came to the rural schools because they needed a "lower" place to highlight their own superiority: after all, these volunteers' shiny institutional markers—such as "a university student studying in the dream university in China" —are shinier when they are *not* surrounded by people of similar profiles. It is rare for high school students in rural areas to meet someone studying in a tier one university in China, not to mention seeing a group of them from an institution that recruits only the best of the best. All of a sudden, these volunteers became

the celebrity figures in the local rural area. Therefore, naturally, Pangpu interpreted the volunteers' drinking and toasting as behaviors to boost their own egos in the countryside.

Pangpu's complaints clearly resemble some of the major arguments in the critical scholarship on volunteering. In particular, he saw the power imbalance between rural students and volunteers from elite universities, and explained the meaning of the program with a critical framework. He acutely argued something similar to critical research on youth volunteering: Pangpu said that he felt "the program was much more exciting for his fellow volunteers than for the students they were teaching." In a similar vein, scholars interested in development projects have written about how first-world women traveling to less developed places can help to constitute a gendered white subjecthood (Heron, 2007) and also how volunteers spend time abroad in search of a rebellious, non-conformist self in response to the mainstream culture back home (Hickel, 2013). Indeed, Pangpu's critique holds true to a certain extent. When Pangpu's teammates travelled to the rural area and realized that they did not know how to toast or drink, they came to realize their urban background, and their sense of the self as a "different" person became more pronounced. In Pangpu's eyes, as much as the volunteers tried to be connected to the soil, they could never be so. The identity of "a student from that [elite] university" would naturally prevent one to do so.

One would think that Pangpu, an outspoken critic of his teammates and the organization, would *never* want to become someone like the top school students. Nor would he want to be part of ZY Project's educational project. Not entirely so. Two months later, when the organization sent out a call-for-submission for its tenth

195

anniversary winter baseball jersey design, Pangpu spent three days to come up with his version and submitted it. He was still reposting ZY Project's recruitment messages on his timeline, saying that whoever is interested in volunteering and knowing more about rural students and rural education should apply to the program. Clearly, ZY Project and the people he met in ZY Project were significant to him. The significance of this experience is best demonstrated through the following confession:

> …I felt like I was so incompetent compared to those students in that university. It seemed to me that they could handle everything well, and the students love them… They just came here to enjoy… But I don't think I would want to volunteer anymore, not until I am mature enough or when I have enough to offer.

Pangpu told me about this feeling of inferiority two weeks after the program concluded, when I met him in Beijing for dinner. Surprisingly and maybe not surprisingly, after Pangpu's interaction with students from elite universities, he embarked on a journey to become someone like them. In particular, he made use of the connections forged in the program to search for student exchange opportunities to art schools in Europe. He also talked a lot to Tuichang, who told me that their conversations were mostly related to her life and education in the U.S. and how Pangpu could leverage the opportunities around him in order to pursue graduate education in a better ranking institution. More recently, Tuichang told me that Pangpu had changed his plan of graduate study: instead of sitting in the graduate school entrance exam, he decided to apply for master's programs in international education in the U.S..

In addition, what Pangpu did during his revisit to his former students was clearly something he would have criticized. Basically, he came back to the school to enjoy himself. A few months later, Pangpu went back to the township, only to spend most of

his time with the school officials, drinking and dining. Tuichang told me that, during the short few days of visiting, Pangpu reiterated that he enjoyed revisiting the township because he "couldn't find people who can drink with him in Beijing" and one of the top reasons of his visit was "to drink with the principals and teachers." His interactions with his former students were limited to the hours when he was drunk or half drunk, and he dragged on keeping the students staying around him and listening to him talking purposelessly. Perhaps, without the presence of the volunteers with better institutional labels, Pangpu was more at ease being himself—at least in his own mind. He told me that he felt he "didn't know what to do when we are [they were] in the group meetings." Without the presence of those teammates who made him feel inferior, Pangpu did the same thing that they had done. He came to the township to search for the "bureaucratism" on dining tables. This was part of his own way of highlighting his own distinction.

To some extent, Pangpu is an extreme example. After all, he worked in the midst of a group of volunteers who studied in the same institution and had known one another before coming to the field-site. It is somewhat conceivable that he drew a clear line between himself and the other volunteers. However, the fact that he repeatedly spoke about their top school label when he was recounting his own traumatizing volunteering experience highlights how crucial this label was for him. It is all the more significant considering the subsequent decisions he made after the program: he decided to pursue something that he fervently criticized himself. In other words, although he critiqued this label and the exclusive community underpinned by this label, he decided to chase this label, with the hope of becoming "one-of-them."

Shaling: Cosmopolitan Knowledge as a Form of Middle-Class Cultural Capital

Similar to Pangpu, Shaling was another open critic of the organization and its educational model. What sets her apart from Pangpu was the lens through which she formulated her critique: while Shaling shared with Pangpu's argument about the school "labels," she attributed these labels not to the volunteers' institutional background, but to their middle-class status. She avidly critiqued the volunteers as too "bourgeois" that they always needed others to take care of them. However, it was ironic that while Shaling characterized the "bourgeois-ness" of other volunteers, she never applied that critical lens onto herself. As I show below, her critique sheds light on how the practice of *jie di qi* has become a constitutive element of Chinese middle-class subjectivity, especially for those who were born in places that were not that close to the "earth" in the Chinese moral geography.

I met Shaling in ZY Project's Beijing headquarter in October 2015, when I had just begun my fieldwork. As it was my first day conducting fieldwork in the organization, interns and employees introduced themselves to me. Different from the other interns, who talked about their majors and institutional affiliations, Shaling stressed on her future aspiration, "I graduated from a university in Henan and majored in Business Management and Administration. But I would switch to sociology (as my major) in graduate school." She also didn't mention the name of her institution, and was eager to tell the others about her new major. Later, I got to know that Shaling was in Beijing because she was taking a gap year, working part-time in NGOs and preparing for her applications to graduate schools in the United States.

Shaling was a straightforward person. On numerous occasions when Niu Huang introduced her as a member of the team, he called her "the poisonous tongue" (*du she*, 毒舌) of the organization. She herself agreed with such characterization, proudly identifying herself as a person "who inappropriately exposes the uneasy truths all the time (瞎说大实话)." Shaling was famous for her scathing critiques on the middle-classness she observed in the volunteers. Half joking and half serious, she invented a term "bourgeois baby" (*zhong chan bao bao*, 中产宝宝, literally translated as "middle-class baby") to describe the elitist volunteers. At first, everyone laughed at the term because it was oxymoronic: *baobao* conveyed a sense of affection, while being bourgeois was considered derogative in her context. Yet later, "bourgeois baby" became a popular category in the staff circle.

Not all volunteers belong to this category however. Those included were the volunteers who were considered as "ego *tai da le*" (ego太大了, meaning "having too big of an ego"), and were seen as potential trouble-makers in the team. Indeed, when the staff discussed the volunteers, they commented on those who did not understand the virtue of being considerate to others or putting themselves into others' shoes. When screening application materials, Niu Huang complained that "there are a lot bourgeois babies applying for our programs again this year" and that these babies "couldn't contribute much to the team." One famous example Kunkun gave was a girl who "packed six pairs of shoes for a two-week program" and "was late for classes because of the time she *had to* spend on doing makeups every morning" (Emphasis in original). To these babies, Shaling constantly rolled her eyeballs, "they are too bourgeois and they have had everything as they grew up."

The critique on youngsters being egoistic is not new in China. Early in the 1990s, a wide range of parenting literature has pointed to the new generation of children as self-centered and "spoiled." The term used then was "little emperors" (*xiao huang di*, 小皇帝). Born in the 1980s, the generation of "little emperors" grew up in a 4-2-1 family structure: they enjoyed attention from their parents and grandparents on both sides. Adults concentrate all their efforts and hopes to this one child in the family, doing their best to fulfill the child's requests (for example Fong, 2004, 2007a; Wonorov, 2003). In turn, the child is expected to be successful in education and beyond. At that time, educators' biggest fear was that these children were overly spoiled. The educators published guidebooks and magazine articles warning the parents not to deprive opportunities for children to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to survive by themselves. Parents should govern and educate the child (*guan jiao*, 管教) to the best ability they could for the healthy growth of the little emperors.

The bourgeois babies were similarly spoiled too, not by their family members, but by the conditions that the well-off families afforded them. Apart from being able to shop for luxurious brand shops, such as makeup, clothes, and electronic gadgets and treat these as part of their everyday necessities, these babies had enjoyed the luxuries of not having to confront setbacks in life. Most of them did not need to worry about material well-being or job prospects upon graduation, as they could always resort to their families for graduate school tuition or simply take a break. Being educated in a Western environment, they mix Chinese and English together in everyday conversations, and some even do so in written documents. Whenever they saw this kind of documents, the staff would sigh,

"the world is going to be doomed if the next generation are all like this…" They are not *jie di qi* because they had always been living comfortably in their own bubbles.

Shaling does not see herself as one of the bourgeois babies. Rather, she distanced herself away from the bourgeois-ness of the other volunteers, saying that she was born and raised up in a Henan regional city (Henan is popularly seen as a low *suzhi* province in China, see Sun, 2009), and went to an ordinary high school (as opposed to the key point, elite ones). She has been bitterly outspoken about her failure in the National University Entrance Exam, and about the university education she received with a "random major at a random university" (as opposed to where she thought she should have been admitted to, *the* top university in Henan Province). So, she went through her classes for the business management degree, and self-taught foundational knowledge in the discipline of sociology. Her aspiration of becoming a sociologist was gradually taking shape, as she found an research assistant internship position in a top university and another part-time research assistant in the same professor's project. Shaling found her substantive research interest focusing on Chinese social welfare services, which then led her to ZY Project's call for application and her work in ZY Project. Shaling applied, but then was asked to stay in Beijing for half a year.

Shaling wanted to change herself on two fronts. Firstly, she would like to earn a more reputable institutional affiliation. Having been educated in a tier two university in China, she always commented that she was too "earthy" compared to the other bourgeois volunteers. While she did not want to find a "job that does not have future prospects" and be settled in life and get married, she found her options limited in China. Wanting to do something to remediate her loss in the National University Entrance Exam battle, she

decided to earn a graduate degree in the U.S. as a compensation. When she was talking

about how she was not able to be admitted to an ideal graduate school with scholarship in

the U.S., she blamed of herself not having a "bling bling résumé" to be included in her

application materials. Secondly, Shaling wanted to change her major: compared to the

other bourgeois babies who chose   to major in liberal arts disciplines, her major in

business management was nothing shiny. While the bourgeois babies always consider the

liberal art degrees "useless," Shaling yearns for such a major. In her mind, what the

others had, such as a Beida or Stanford label, a major in art history, etc., was to her

"cultural capital" in itself. In ZY Project, the everyday conversations were no short of

intellectual discussions, or at least, languages using big academic terms. In Shaling's

eyes, the cosmopolitan knowledge that these volunteers acquired was only of add-on

values: something worth bragging about, or worse still, something with which one could

appear to be erudite when he or she actually knows nothing. "My favorite part of Khan's

Privilege is the part on 'bullshit,' " she once told me during a conversation on recent

ethnographies on education, "isn't this what the bourgeois babies are doing and will teach

their rural students to do?" In other words, Shaling believes that the bourgeois babies

were attracted to ZY Project due to its "liberal-arts" orientation, which provided them the

opportunity to show off their knowledge in ancient Greek literature or philosophical

thoughts. This was a perfect place to stage the "useless knowledge."

Shaling's view on the liberal arts knowledge becomes evident after she came back

from a dinner with Niu Huang and a close friend of his during the pre-field orientation.

As she walked into the hotel room, she exclaimed to me,

Xiao Wang (小王, Little Wang[29]), I finally got to understand why Niu Huang is doing ZY Project! He needed to have something to say in his friend circle. I went on a trip with his close friends, the ones who were in similar cohorts when he was an undergrad. They all have something: one owns a one-million-RMB car (about $150,000); some have family businesses to run, or have become successful entrepreneurs. But what does Niu Huang have? He has a lot of followers in ZY Project!

As she told me these, she took out her iPhone and jotted down notes about what she just said to me. "This could be part of my contribution to Bourdieu's theory on cultural capital sometime later. I'd better take notes. Oh I'm such a sharp person. I am sensitive to theoretical contributions…" Clearly, she was excited that she finally found her interpretation of why Ivy League, elite students signed up for volunteering, and perhaps placed one foot in the world of the academia.

Shaling's comparison between Niu Huang and his friends reflects her interpretations of how "useless knowledge" is part of the middle-class cultural capital. For numerous times, Shaling witnessed the big terms, the complex sentence structures, and the far-fetching content in the everyday conversations in ZY Project headquarters. Moreover, she witnessed how Niu Huang, one of the person who liked to cite the Great Books all the time, received attention and admiration from other ZY Project volunteers, high school students, and his colleagues working in other non-profit organizations. The trip she went with Niu Huang's friends was illuminating, because she got to consolidate her deduction about the add-on value of the great books. To her, the cosmopolitan knowledge was equivalent to his friends' material possession, such as an expensive car or a white-collar job with considerable salary that they inherited from their middle or upper

---

[29] I had multiple nicknames in the field, and "*Xiao Wang*" was one of them.

class families. In other words, in her eyes, volunteering—the pursuit of cosmopolitan knowledge and the effort to democratize it—was what admitted Niu Huang into a middle-class social circle. Being materially well-off no longer signifies the middle-class status: to be a truly middle-class person, one has to be well-read and to be able to take part in similar conversations on the "great books."

Hence, by constantly reiterating that she herself was not "bourgeois," what Shaling alludes to is how cosmopolitan knowledge has become a new middle-class identity marker in contemporary China. Scholars on middle-class Chinese parenting practices have observed the popularity of after-school programs, such as ballet and violin classes (for example, Anagnost, 2004), as well as the new emergence of Confucian schools (Wu and Welming, 2016) in urban areas, which serve the purpose of the parents to pursue a further layer of status distinction among their children. Moreover, the adult Chinese new rich is "beset by anxiety over the moral and symbolic limitations of their practices" and is "actively looking for ways to reform them" (Osburg, 2013, p. 187). What Shaling sees here in the volunteer circle, then, is precisely in line with what previous critical researchers have written about. To be versed in the great books and not concerned about material constraints signifies one's middle-classness in contemporary China.

Embedded in Shaling's critique is a critical observation: she sees the experience of going "down" to the rural site, "eating bitterness," and teaching cosmopolitan knowledge as a form of middle-class cultural capital. She would argue that the other volunteers were instrumentalizing such experiences for future job prospects. The

careerism was evident when considering the ultimate "purpose" of such *jie di qi* practices: there was a PhD student who signed up for volunteering because she intended to conduct a research project for her graduate studies; Tuichang came back to her field-site with a survey research project and stayed in the high school for another six weeks; Pangpu was able to connect to the volunteers to help him edit his graduate school application essays. Perhaps Niu Huang himself was the most representative one: having graduated from an Ivy institution, he made a living out of the severe rural-urban inequality. Shaling's critique on such cases of careerism was acute and similar to existing scholarly critique on global citizenship programs, which argues that the motivation behind traveling abroad is people's desire to integrate themselves better into the increasingly neoliberalizing job market at home (Hickel, 2013; Handler, 2013). In China, the cosmopolitan knowledge and experience in the "backward" places could craft the volunteers a new space for career development.

How does Shaling herself understand her own participation in the volunteering project then? When I asked her to reflect on her working experience in ZY Project, she sent me the message below via WeChat.

> I feel that my first internship at Tsinghua University was primarily a process of disillusionment about top universities in China, and my time in ZY Project helped me to be disillusioned by Ivy [schools]. Now, I guess, I don't care about the others. I just needed to move forward in this system, to have the skills and the abilities. I have to work hard to improve myself on both fronts, and if I end up doing OK on the material level, that's fine. No matter what, I hope I don't have to work as hard as my parents do…. Whenever I think about how these people [the bourgeois volunteers] are… Damn "high quality liberal arts education." I don't see real impacts at all.

Followed this message was a sniffing sticker, which explained Shaling's attitude.

In this quote, Shaling explicitly dismisses the cosmopolitan education that the organization attempts to enact in rural places, and talks about her personal aspirations as well. She felt that her failure in being admitted into a top university, and choosing a random major in Business Administration had prevented her from participating in a range of educational opportunities that elite university students had access to, such as the opportunity "to work as a teaching assistant and to be able to find professors to talk about plans for internship and research." She wanted to escape the identity of an undergraduate student in a non-key-point university and with an "earthy" major on the job market. By saying that she "has to move forward in this system," she decided to study abroad in the hope of gaining material return and the cultural capital that she did not possess herself. When talking about her career choices, she told me that she "has no other way out (*chu lu*, 出路) rather than pursuing an academic degree and career in sociology." Resourceful as she was, she always sent me post-doctoral postings in China and abroad.

Shaling's disappointments are similar to what were documented on the part of another group: the students from poor rural background who made it to top universities in urban cities in China. Similar to Shaling, rural migrant students were disillusioned by Beijing in their pursuits to become a moral person (Bergekaen, 2016). They came to Beijing only to find themselves to be looked down upon, because they lacked the other kinds of social capital that local elite students possessed. Some appropriated Party membership to transcend the rural status and subsequently, to strategically improve their chances in the labor market. Yet these rural students ended up being stuck in the "ant tribe" (also see Lian, 2009), living in cramped conditions on the outskirts of cities and

working in low-paying jobs. Or they managed to "keep their paths open" (Bergekaen, 2016, p.92-94), forgoing the romantic imagination that they could transform their rural identities to urban ones. Shaling's choice with ZY Project was similar: having been disillusioned by the uselessness of cosmopolitan, liberal arts education, Shaling decided to leave. When the organization asked her to film a short video about her work experience for publicity purposes, she refused to do so. She told me that she did not want to hang out with these people again because "they and I are different."

Two points can be drawn from Shaling's story. Firstly, as stated above, when placing ZY Project into the larger Chinese context, the cosmopolitan knowledge and practices that ZY Project attempts to embody has become a means of making distinctions in China. Different from the cultural omnivoreness that Khan (2012) depicts in his ethnography, this cosmopolitan orientation has its root in the Chinese moral geography and synthesizes the rural, the urban, and the foreign.

Secondly, it is important to note that Shaling's critique on the other's middle-classness has overlooked the extent of her own material condition. If "middle-class" is, first and foremost, about one's economic background, Shaling could hardly be exempted from this category. After all, using the standard criteria to measure the material affluence Shaling could afford, the answer is not a definite no. Once, an intern came over to me and asked why Shaling had so much money to shop for makeup and skincare products on Taobao[30]; Shaling's family could afford two years of tuitions and living costs for her graduate studies in an elite private institution outside of Boston. In this regard, Shaling is

---

[30] The Chinese equivalent of eBay.

no less "middle-class" herself. What masks her from recognizing this is her lack of attention to the material possession in her structural analyses.

This leads to the greatest irony in Shaling's critique. In her narratives, she rarely ever puts herself into her criticism of the pursuit of cosmopolitan knowledge and careerism. Was Shaling less careerist compared to the bourgeois babies she critiques? Hardly so. Shaling interned in ZY Project for about a year, first as a staff and then as a long-term ZY Space Fellow working in a county level high school during her gap year. She always joked to me that the only reason she stayed on working in ZY Project was to "swindle money": after all, she was struggling with money to get by during her gap year, and working as a Fellow meant free room and board in a high school. From this aspect, Shaling, just as the other volunteers that she critiqued, took advantage of the organization and the volunteer opportunities in a more explicit way: not only did she gain a line on her résumé and a paragraph in her graduate school application essays, but also, Shaling literally used her salary to make it through the gap semester.

Shaling was not the only one who critiqued the people around them and used these people at the same time. Some others, like Hongyuan, chose to work in ZY Project as a full-time staff while most of the other past volunteers would keep in touch with the organization and work for it as an interviewer, a mentor during the training session, or help out in its various activities. Hence, the biggest irony is that, although the non-bourgeois babies were the ones who actually critiqued the bourgeois ones as appropriating the volunteering experience for résumé padding purposes, they were the ones who purposefully and explicitly took advantage of the organization and of their experiences with it. The volunteering experience led Shaling to find her research focus in

her graduate program, for which she proposed to conduct research on the neoliberalism embedded in social entrepreneurship in China; Hongyuan needed some time off to prepare for her graduate school entrance exam[31] after she graduated, and has been working in the organization during her gap year. Shaling was accurate in bringing forward the careerist critique; yet she decided to become "one of them."

"Being Connected to the Soil" vs. Being "Coarsely Earthy"

Both Pangpu and Shaling described themselves as "earthy" people. Both volunteered in the organization on different positions for varied periods of time. They also raised critiques on their colleagues and on the education they provided to the rural students. What was common across the two of them was that they were equally disillusioned by the ideal of cosmopolitanism in education and the people and the organization that tried to embody such an ideal. As a result, they left ZY Project and continued onto their own pursuits in life. Toward the end of this chapter, let me spare a few words on the implications of their stories.

Different Conceptualizations of the Future

A striking similarity across the stories of Shaling and Pangpu is the way in which they were able to quickly distinguish themselves from the other overseas-educated Chinese undergraduate students. In the context of the volunteer circle, such difference largely hinges upon one's educational background, and whether one is able to identify

---

[31] In China, graduate school admission system is dependent on an exam score and an interview. Most students would need to prepare for the mandatory politics and English exams.

with the goals and materials that are outside of structural constraints of education. For example, Pangpu changed his lesson plan from teaching materials outside the state-required curriculum to those within the curriculum, confining his teaching within the structure of the existing Chinese education; Shaling's interpretations of her colleagues' activities strictly followed structural critiques, arguing that the major purpose of the organization was to garner various forms of symbolic capital. They had a critical frame of mind as they were able to see the implicit structure that had them marginalized in China and on the global scale. It is precisely because of their identification within the state's structure that they could not resonate with ideals such as *jie di qi* or "eating bitterness": in their eyes, such ideals and practices were simply self-fashioning tools and the whole purpose was to accumulate cultural capital. They clearly saw the structural inequalities embedded in the global education system, and recognized how they themselves were products and victims of global structural inequality.

At the same time, such critical consciousness on their positionality did not lead them to stay away from the system. On the contrary, what Pangpu and Shaling did was to exploit the system all the more to their advantage: they consciously made use of volunteering as part of their professional quests. In other words, although they were critiquing the careerist, entrepreneurial ethos of volunteering on the part of the bourgeois babies, what Pangpu and Shaling did was practically the same, and only less ingenuous: they play the game of doing good to their advantages. Eventually, the real goal of "doing good"—whether to increase the rural students' test scores or to help the students see a larger world that was not confined by the structure—was all the more lost in their rhetoric and practice.

Therefore, what their stories show is a limited conceptualization of the "future," both for themselves as well as for their students. They saw ZY Project's education as futile because it could not help the students to become more successful within the state education system; they also saw the experience of volunteering as a new kind of "cultural capital" of some sort that would eventually translate into another form of competitive advantage. In other words, to be "successful" is to succeed using the criteria *defined by* the system: Shaling wants to have an advanced foreign degree, while Pangpu yearns for a top school institutional affiliation (if not more). The ideal future follows what Hansen calls the "temporal sequence of advancing" (Hansen, 2015, p. 57), which dictates a personal development scheme that ends with, ideally, studying abroad and obtaining an attractive employment. Shaling and Pangpu unconsciously followed such a development scheme, making use of the doing good encounter in order to advance on such a path. Thus, the aspiration that they share is directly related to the state's developmentalist rationale. That is, it is the state's governance technique that encourages individuals capitalize on different forms of experience to gain competitive advantage on the now global employment market (see Hoffman, 2010; Rofel, 2007).

In this regard, the critics, such as Shaling and Pangpu, are simultaneously critiquing the system while attempting to succeed *within* the system. Their critiques on the volunteers and the doing good project are not contributing to undo the system itself. Ironically, their own attempts to chase cultural capital would only exacerbate the existing structurally unequal reality in China: the critique would bring about change only if the critics are actively working against the system. The critics will need to personally work on fighting against issues such as social injustice and inequality.

Yet unfortunately, working on these fights as professionals is not financially rewarding enough; what is worse, it creates ethical quandaries on both personal and professional levels. For one thing, working in the development sector bring the privileged youths closer to the unequal reality in China. Such experience often renders these professionals to question the legitimacy of the state's approach to govern the Chinese people and the state, and the extent to which the "helpers" are truly able to "help" – to unsettle the structure – in the Chinese state that is deeply unequal. Those self-reflexive development workers then face such uncertainties and self-interrogations on a daily basis. The longer one works as a professional, the more questions they have about the nature of their work. Moreover, working in the development sector also deviate themselves from the "attractive employment positions," which, in the foreign-educated Chinese student circle, usually refer to a position on the Wall Street or in the Bay area. One informant once told me that after a couple of drinks, Niu Huang, a six feet man of more than 240 pounds, wept and bemoaned about the fact of he himself as a man in the upper 20s working in rural China in the non-profit sector, compared to his college friends who had already established themselves in banking or consulting sectors, or at least, pursuing an advanced degree in graduate schools. Niu Huang's friend, Qin Yuefei, another Ivy league graduate whose work has featured in the Chinese state media, was described as a person deeply anxious about his future in a GQ Magazine cover story.[32] In this regard, only those who have a means of earning money, to support the family, and to live a decent life, however they define it, are free enough to devote themselves in the NGO sector in China.

---

[32] This story has generated lots of controversy, mostly because the author of the story has quoted words from Qin without his permission, including vulgarity.

In the words of Bianjing, another volunteer whose story I will write in detail in the following section, they had to "live a life" first, before thinking about social justice or working for this cause.

Working for an ideal indeed requires privilege. Niu Huang and Qin Yuefei had their Ivy League titles when they travel to rural areas in China. People like Niu Huang had made a career out of global structural inequality, and had come up with projects that would combat such inequality. Those volunteers who returned to ZY Project over and over again came to search for "earthiness," some were simply reminiscent about the "joyous and/or difficult time" that they spent with the students, while some others, such as Tuichang, came back with research projects with the rural students, hoping to spend some time with people they had worked with before. Some others, like Rao Hei, who had witnessed many elites and non-elites, left his position with dismay: "I mean, during all these years working in ZY Project, I always did this kind of things for them. It's really meaningless. At the end I had to carry the drunken deputy team leader back to the dorm. I've done so much of these meaningless things… I have to move on." As he told me that he had redone his résumé to "take out all the work experience with ZY Project," he returned to the culturally idealized life trajectory: to be a graduate student in the U.S. again. As much as he loved teaching and exploring the rural countryside himself, he left because he had to make a career for himself. Rao Hei's phrase of "moving on" was a perfect demonstration of the privileged nature of "doing good" in China: one has to be materialistically well-off enough, to not be concerned about the culturally idealized way of advancing , in order to set out the search for cosmopolitanism and authenticity.

Therefore, rather than focusing on how the practice of Chinese cosmopolitanism gives rise to a new form of cultural capital, perhaps it is more productive to point out that the privileged educational experience enables my informants to conceive of an alternative vision of the individual and of educational future.

An Alternative Vision of the "Future" Deviant from State Dictation

Then, what exactly is entailed in this vision of the future, and how is the vision related to the experiential dimensions of volunteering, i.e., going "down" to the field-site and "eating bitterness"? Here, it is necessary to consider the perspective from Niu Huang, the co-founder of ZY Project and to date, the person who has worked for the organization for the longest period of time. In a well-educated circle as ZY Project, Niu Huang is still (in)famous for his frequent invocation of philosophical texts in everyday conversations. One day, as he and I were talking about the role of NGOs in China, I tried to raise the existing academic critiques on the "development sector" which argues that development organization's aid work has, in effect, exacerbated or created new forms of global inequality. To these arguments, he responded,

> From the perspective of the academic scholars, we could always pause and reflect on how we could not talk about "progress," but such critiques presuppose that we are not hungry and that we have time to talk about what we have just discussed… but I don't think that NGO is an "extra" thing. It should not be something that people do after they are *not* in need of food… "Doing good" should be an expression of social religion, or at least an alternative to religion. And if we look at the civil associations in de Tocqueville's works, civil associations are, more or less, for self-education.

The quote above shows how Niu Huang has an alternative vision about the role of civil associations and, by and large, that of education. To him, critical reflection on the effect

of "helping" is important; however, the capacity of critical reflection should not be reserved only to those who are materially well-off enough. Rather, Niu Huang holds that the capacity of "helping" and thinking about "helping" should be open to those who are marginalized in the society as well. In the Chinese context, these are the internal Other – the rural and the ethnic minority – the people who are deemed to possess low "human quality." Therefore, what Niu Huang envisions is a redefinition of civil society vis-à-vis the state. He sees the role of civil associations more than fostering changes: in addition to trying to materialize these changes, civil associations are also capable of rekindling hope and aspirations. More importantly, his ideal is to foster change in such a way that "capital *per se* should not be the sole criteria that determines whether one could engage in the project of self-education or not." Thus, the organization operates following a vision to democratize the project of "doing good" and to invite more non-elite students to engage in this process of self-education. Recruiting more Chinese undergraduate students and welcoming the students who graduated from ZY Project back to the organization as volunteers is ZY Project's way to broaden the purpose of "doing good" through self-education.

This is the alternative vision that my informants refer to. During the course of my fieldwork, I heard over and over that the "bourgeois babies" half-jokingly described themselves as "a bunch of abnormal people" who are too stubborn to "chase their dreams." What they mean is that, this vision departs from the state's developmentalist scheme which monetizes all kinds of experience into forms of distinction on the global human capital market. Embedded in this vision, then, is the foreign-educated youths' deep dissatisfaction of – even resistance to – the Party-State's governing technique

215

entrenched in the state education system, the employment market, and population control (for example, Greenhalgh, 2009; Wu, 2016). This silent resistance was made all the more salient more recently, when ZY Project finally decided to lead the volunteers to read Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* One of the discussion questions asked the volunteers to ponder on ways that they could potentially be an "oppressor" in the rural classrooms, and how to avoid doing so. To foster what they see as "peer connections" between the internal Other and themselves is a place for them to experiment with an alternative vision, while also, quietly resisting the state's classification scheme.

The Moral Implication of the Alternative Vision

Niu Huang is not the only one who expresses this alternative vision. In fact, in my numerous conversations with people outside of the ZY Project circle, I constantly hear them applaud for the volunteers: they would praise the volunteers as "noble" (*gaoshang,* 高尚) and "inspiring" to "the general public." They say that it is "courageous enough for them to come back to China and work in rural areas" and that they are "role models" for the other Chinese citizens who are largely driven by reputation and material possessions. The moralist tone is apparent in these conversations, and Bianjing, a volunteer from a non-key-point university spoke about his view on the NGO circle well. One day, he suddenly asked me whether I liked Chen Jinnan, a heroic figure in a popular Chinese martial art novel. Then he made an analogy between Chen and the bourgeois babies working in NGOs: just like Chen, who always fought on behalf of the powerless and the poor, these elites were the "kind of people who continue to do things that are hopeless in their minds." He further explained,

216

These people represent the pure contrarians (*yigu qingliu,* 一股清流), those who are perseverant enough and who want to change the world… When other people see them [such as Chen Jinnan or those young people from prominent political family backgrounds, and people such as Niu Huang with shining educational backgrounds], they could say that "see, in this world, there are people who are trying…" Although they are consuming the people that they are helping, at least, the society has something to talk about, such as this kind of people and what they do. It's the "positive energy" that they represent, the perfect Party Secretary figure, lol…

In this quote, Bianjing alludes to recent loss of morality as well as the growing anxiety about it in contemporary China. Scholars writing about the Chinese moral landscape have documented ways in which Chinese citizens have become individualist and more concerned about material pursuits (Yan, 2016). While at the same time, the new rich might become more concerned about the loss of morality in China, and Chinese middle-class parents are eager to teach their children about ways to be a moral person (Xu, 2017). Bianjing shares this view. After some time working in ZY Project and visiting other active NGOs in China, Bianjing said that these NGOs were "necessary." To him, these people exist, not for their actual contribution, but for the reason that "they have to exist." "Ordinary people love them, actually," said Bianjing, "because that's just how the Chinese society is. It's like Chen Jinnan, people who make use of their social status in order to do what they think is correct… In our society, we *need* someone who would like to voice themselves, who can speak out."

Thus, asking whether the NGOs, especially the bourgeois cosmopolitan babies, are exerting long-lasting impacts on the Chinese education system misses a major point of "helping" in China. In a society where the existence of organizations—for-profit and non-profit alike—are largely hinged on the social network to which the organization has

access, the privilege of the non-profit sector is a given. To non-elites like Bianjing, who have always been struggling to get by in life, what matters is to live a decent life: "you [Chenyu] can read, write, and do research for many, many years, and to think about these metaphysical stuff such as what is 'truth, subjectivity, and equality.' For a lot of people, it's hard enough to just live a life. Why do we need people like you then? We need something colorful and beautiful so that we could simply put up with our lives." On a broader scale, the bourgeois babies are tokens of hope, although this hope is mixed with careerism and entrepreneurism, and could even be contradictory to the local reality.

It is also important to note that Bianjing did not mean to equate the vision of the NGOs to that of the Communist Party, as some might argue according to Bianjing's analogy of Chen Jinnan and the "perfect party figure." The reason is that, the quality of the "future" that the bourgeois have in mind is beyond the dictation of the Chinese Party-State. After all, they imagine a cosmopolitan community beyond existing material, cultural, and social constraints: a community in which individuals are not measured upon how much human capital is this person worthy of for the purpose of the state economy and power. This alternative vision of the "future" is what the bourgeois babies trying to actively enact, and it is the governing apparatus of the state – including the examination system, the *hukou* system, the attraction to the "foreign", all of which are the direct results of the human quality discourse – that the bourgeois babies need to work work. What happens is that, although ZY Project operates within the Party-State's regulation, its vision and its educational practices point beyond such regulation. Thus, my informants are constantly existing in a state of *becoming*, which signifies new political possibilities that could "open up avenues for political organizing and collective practices of refusal

and liberation" (Ruddick, 2010, p. 30). This is the production of a new Chinese

cosmopolitan ethical framework that centers on working against the Party-State,

developmentalist discourse without directly claiming the phrase "resistance."

Coda: Chinese Cosmopolitanism as Culturally Deviant

In this chapter, I narrate the perspectives from the critics. The critics argue that

the Chinese cosmopolitanism gives rise to a new form of cultural capital in China. I then

closely analyze the narrative of the critique, showing that the critical difference between

the two views is the vision about the future. In what follows, I briefly theorize the morals

of their stories.

Firstly, the "bourgeois babies" are privileged Chinese youths. They are the ones

born into urban families that did not confine them to the exam system in Chinese

education. This requires the economic foundation that the majority of Chinese citizens do

not possess to begin with. This foundation enables them to be educated not completely

within the Chinese state-education system.

Moreover, what set the "eating bitterness" elite apart from volunteers like Shaling

was their ideal of thinking beyond the structure, and of imagining an idealistic utopia free

of material and structural divides. Of course, this is not to say that all bourgeois babies

think in this way—after all, in one of the online volunteer training modules, the key

message was to have the volunteers understand the marginalizing effects brought about

by the oppressive state education system. And most of the bourgeois babies get it: they

write in their reflection pieces thinking about their positions within the Chinese education

system. Precisely because of such a realization, the bourgeois babies come up with their

own "doing good" projects as an alternative way of working *against* the system. In China, where the state and the market function together to perpetuate the cycle of inequality (Spires, 2014) to realize the state's global ambition, non-governmental organizations resist in a different way. Kleinman (2011) has rightly wrote that, the attitude of "perturb[ing] and disturb[ing] their local worlds, challenging and resisting an ethos that they find wanting" grows out of "critical self-reflection, ethical aspiration, and the practical realities surrounding each of us", and in China, the local expression of this local attitude may be less a "form of political criticism than an experience of moral resistance" (p. 26-27). Unevenly distributed among Chinese youths (c.f., Appadurai, 2013; Hall and Stambach, 2017), this "capacity to aspire" for an alternative future and the practice of it is an experience of moral resistance, as it is essentially deviant from the official, state-sponsored vision of an ideal life in contemporary China.

Conclusion: Continuing the Search for an Authentic Community

In this research, I set out to the field with an intellectual query to understand the rationale and the impact of the educational programs conceptualized by the overseas-educated Chinese students. As an ethnographer with a post-development perspective, at first, I secretly laughed at the volunteers' "naive" approaches to education, volunteering, and helping in general. Yet over the course of my fourteen-month fieldwork with ZY Project—its staff, student, volunteer, partner teachers, and alumni, I have encountered numerous confusing, angry, yet touching and fulfilling moments. Contextualizing the volunteering experience in relation to the educational background of my informants, I end up writing about how their efforts of localization has given rise to a new kind of educational ideal, which, in turn, gives rise to new understandings about the self, middle-classness, and cosmopolitanism, as well as new relations that are currently being forged in China. In other words, I have realized that, as much as I acknowledge the elitism embedded in my story, it has much more to show than merely a critique using theoretical constructs such as cultural capital, structural inequality, or social stratification. In this final chapter, I summarize the empirical and theoretical contributions of the study, as well as its limitations.

Volunteering, Chinese Cosmopolitanism, and an Authentic Self

The rise of educational volunteerism stems from the widening rural-urban educational gap, as well as Chinese people's growing concern about values such as equality, equity, and social justice. The overseas-educated Chinese students become one of the prominent groups that work for change in contemporary China, bringing back what they have learned in the foreign countries. What they did not foresee is that, by creating projects for change, a generation of Chinese youths have undergone a process of ethical self-formation. Working in the rural countryside is a critical domain through which new understandings about a cosmopolitan and an authentic person emerge. In my study of *Zhiyou* Project, I show such a process of cosmopolitanism and authenticity. Below is a brief summary of the themes that I have explored in this dissertation.

Firstly, the overseas-educated Chinese youths and the NGOs and projects that they created have undergone a process of localization. Through this process, they have formed a cosmopolitan ideal that is significant to the operation, the people, and the education of the organization. At the organizational level, the student organization has grown into a bureaucratic NGO based in Beijing. Its educational model has also begun to heavily focus on "outcomes" and "skills." There are more youths from Chinese universities taking part in the volunteering activities as well. On the individual level, the youths have formed an ideal of *jie di qi,* meaning "to be connected to the soil." The ideal self is malleable and empathetic, so that a person should be able to listen to and be connected to others. The educational development projects in the rural countryside is an ideal moral and geographical location for the search for such a self. Rooted in the

Chinese moral geography, the ideal of "to be connected to the soil" is cosmopolitan in nature, synthesizing the rural, the urban, and the foreign alike.

Such a search for the new self is an ethical project. It entails intense intellectual and physical sufferings. As I have documented, the volunteers went through the harsh circumstances for the internal Others. This process of self-transformation was one of the most valuable experiential dimensions of volunteering: my informants came to believe that they have fostered valuable changes in the Chinese unequal educational system. While on the outset, the sacrifice is meant for the others, volunteering in the rural area is important for the formation of an ethical self amidst the moral vacuum in contemporary China.

The formation of this cosmopolitan ideal is also significant in the ideal educational model and the ways the youths teach it. Recognizing the dehumanizing nature of education that is inherent in the current Chinese school system, the volunteers attempt to rehumanize education through an emphasis on the so-called "useless knowledge," including that from the Great Books and the local knowledge from the students. Such an education model highlights the value of learning in itself and deemphasizes the usefulness of education. The goal of this education is to cultivate the students to become a "better person" and to be able to think beyond the limited opportunities they face in the unequal Chinese society.

Lastly, the critics within the organization also show that, on a broader scale, the foreign education experience enables the Chinese cosmopolitan ideal that conceptualizes the future in a radically different way. More than a new middle-class, elite status marker, the practice of the cosmopolitan ideal is a form of silent and implicit resistance to the

Party-State's developmentalist scheme. Taken in the form of a moral experience, the Chinese cosmopolitanism signifies room for political possibility in China.

Contributions

This research contributes to existing literatures both empirically and theoretically. Firstly, my study highlights the culturally particular way of understanding terms such as "global" and "cosmopolitanism." Existing literature about cosmopolitanism is largely based on the premise that cosmopolitanism is a response to understanding the global space through the framework of the modern nation-states. In other words, cosmopolitanism is understood as an ideal rooted in Greek philosophy and explained within the global North vs. global South framework. However, as I have shown, the Chinese youths interprets cosmopolitanism as a response to the structural inequalities that are in place both in China and on a global scale. That is, to be cosmopolitan is to be connected to both the rural (the internal Others) and the foreign (the external Others). Critical in this kind of cosmopolitanism are human *relations* forged with the Other, and the capacity to aspire to a new global order that transcends existing structural divisions, be it cultural, social, or material. In this regard, this study contributes an empirical case in the scholarly discussion to decenter and decolonize the meaning of "global citizenship" and "cosmopolitanism."

In addition, my study also joins a body of literature on service-learning, gap year traveling, volunteering, and aid workers, and show a different kind of self that is formed in these projects. More importantly, I show the ethical/moral dimension in the process of such self-transformation and highlight the new relationship between the "helper" and the

"helped." In this regard, this study echoes the more recent "aidland" literature and literatures on Chinese youths and argues for a more complicated picture of global development work.

Moreover, my research joins an emerging body of literature that highlights the role of ideal in formal and non-formal education. The Director of Curriculum Development once questioned me when I questioned her about the use of philosophical and literary materials from the Great Books, "why do you think students in our partnered schools are different from those in urban schools and in America? Can they not understand these?" Not only does her quote reflect the cosmopolitan idealism, but also, her quote represents the kind of confidence that the volunteers have for the rural students. With such confidence, and with their belief in a cosmopolitan community, they nurtured the aspirations of the students, whose ambitions have been largely crushed by the state-dictated system. What their stories tell us is the power of the ideal, and how the ideal could be fractured by the modern, neoliberal condition. While it is important to contextualize the formation of idealism in relation to the privileged socioeconomic status, it is also important to see how idealism has enabled the individuals to envision and work for a future that is different from the present.

Lastly, the importance of ideals in enacting changes also points to the uneasy relationship between NGOs and the Chinese state. As many scholars have already argued, it is difficult for voluntary associations to craft out an alternative space for the formation of a Chinese civil society that is separate from both the state and the market economy. However, as I have shown that the NGO actors—at both individual and organizational levels—have undergone significant transformations in the search of their ultimate ideals,

it is important to pay attention to the kind of learning on the part of the actors in the process of enacting the ideals. To use a simple example, after several years of observing the programs, a senior consultant of ZY Project has warned the volunteers that, what they would learn from these programs would inevitably outweigh their students' learning, but this should not deter them from enacting such changes. In this regard, completely separating the civil society from the state and expecting the civil society to directly confront the state system is *not* the only way to foster changes. In particular, when the state and its discourse has such prevalent impacts on the everyday lives in and outside schools, perhaps it is viable to conceptualize civil society as a learning community, whose goal is to mediate and synthesize the discourses of the ideal and the reality. The self-education that occurs and the ensuing ideals formed in the process is part of the changes itself. The self-education and the education *for* the others is what makes changes viable and ideals realizable.

Further Research Directions

This study is limited in a number of ways, and additional research will greatly enhance its findings. Firstly, a deeper analyses on the unequal gender distribution of the people involved in the program would deepen our understanding on the relationship between gendered subjectivity and the cosmopolitanism ideal. As this phenomenon is widely observed in the emerging NGO field in China, understanding female participation in civic associations may shed light on a renewed understanding of the ways in which Chinese people engage with global values, and how these values are changing the meanings of being a female in the younger generation in China.

Another future direction is the lived realities of the students and local teachers in such volunteer programs. During the course of my fieldwork, one of my primary observations is that, it is the foreignness of the volunteers that has drawn the attention of the students and has motivated the students to study harder while keeping their minds open about alternative paths. As more and more students of ZY Project are graduating from the rural high schools and will soon be working in ZY Project programs as volunteers or assistant teachers themselves, it is worthwhile to further document and explain how such work may or may not influence their view on education and on the ideal future.

Similarly, with the more recent reform in the National University Entrance Exam that places more emphasis on qualities such as creativity and problem-solving skills, the impacts of NGOs on rural classrooms remain to be seen. In fact, while I was in the field, I had witnessed some local teachers' passion on the new pedagogy and the rural-oriented materials that ZY Project provided. After I left the field, the organization has fostered a vibrant online teacher community that convenes to discuss the challenges they face in their own PBL classrooms. Further research is needed on the ways that these practices could potentially create larger educational change on the local level.

Lastly, and perhaps more importantly, the political implication of the rise of the new educated elite remains to be seen. As I have pointed out, the cosmopolitan ideal is morally significance on both individual and collective levels. The NGOs are also civic associations, which, by definition, shoulder the responsibility of social transformation. My informants are also open critics of the governing ideology and practices of the Chinese Party-State and are often also participating in other NGOs for issues such as

gender equality and environmental protection. After reading the first draft of this dissertation, Niu Huang told me in a phone conversation that, "you [I] probably could draw out the criticisms on the state more," especially in the parts where I wrote about the official classification of Chinese ethnicities and the ways in which ZY Project itself was coopted into the state education's official discourse. Perhaps, in contemporary China, the urge for change have directly fostered the young generation to contemplate on how to live *with* the structure, which, may or may not lead to the actual practice and realization of the ideal. Yet, as more Chinese citizens are contemplating for change, these moral experiences might lead to an alternative conceptualization of change, particularly in politically charged environments, such as in contemporary China (c.f., Kleinman, 2011).

Indeed, it is by locally engaging with these global aspirations—ethical, emotional, and educational—that my informants hope to build a good life in their everyday social world. And it is in these mundane social worlds that the China of the future is being built. Much work remains to be done on the ways in which such aspirations may shape the local, everyday life, which in turn may carve out a greater space for the formation of civic and subjective diversity.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In the final section of this dissertation, I present two final portraits, one of the volunteers and one of their students. In the body of the dissertation, I have not been able to find proper places to narrate these stories; yet the complexities of these figures and their stories always remind me of the conundrums that they had faced, about ZY Project and their lives, and the difficult decisions that they have to make when facing these

228

conundrums. It was through their struggles that I got to better understand the complexity of human life.

Niu Huang was generous enough to open the door of ZY Project to me as an ethnographer. I had questioned him thousands of times about the educational approaches and the elitist idealism embedded in his organization. Well-read as he was, Niu Huang was far more eloquent than I was (and could ever be) when asked to use theories to explain the networking, socializing events that he had to attend. One day, at around midnight, after reposting the organization's fundraising page to the ZY Project media outlets, Niu Huang sat down and told me that, "you have to criticize these fundraisers we have been doing; otherwise you are not fulfilling your job as an ethnographer." On the high speed train rides and the leisurely excursions to nearby villages and towns near ZY Project's partner schools, I also heard him talking about the history of the Buddhist and Daoist temples, the stories he read from his Great Books, and the conversations he had with local villagers about tea leaves, incense, and ancestral worship rituals. Compared with the forms modeled after *Understanding by Design* or the ethnic Miao clothing patterns students made, Niu Huang was far more passionate about the lived local culture and history in China, as I saw his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm when he talked about the one CEP project that led students to delve deeper into the living customs, to turn this process as a learning opportunity, and to guide students into an utopia where they do not have to think about what to be tested on in the next exam. Then, I finally realized that, perhaps he did mean it when he quoted from Ithaka, a contemporary Greek poem by C. P. Cavafy. After he narrated his personal migration journeys to the United States and then back to China, he told the students that "the real Ithaka only exists in one's heart." He

was trying to ask the students to appreciate the beauty of knowledge and aspire for journeys other than the pre-determined ones in the Chinese school system. It was not until then that I realized that my questions about "helping," "elitism", and "global citizens" were too naive to the extent that, my informants simply dismissed the questions with a sigh: "Oh not again… Why do you even ask, Chenyu?"

Fortunately, with the help of Rao Hei, another ZY Project's key figure, I was able to visualize, albeit in just a fleeting second, the ZY Project that was "authentic," free from bureaucracy and the ensuing institutional constraints. It was the moment during the pre-program orientation when, after he had spent several hours complaining about the organization's "absurdity," he still chose to sit down in the crowd of the volunteers (to use his words, the "youngsters") and sing the ZY Project song before volunteers departed to their respective field sites. As he was singing, he sent me a WeChat message saying that he was singing the old lyrics, and would only do so, because the old version does not contain any word of advertisement. At that point, with the hilarious, embarrassing, and sometimes touching stories he narrated, I saw a group of idealistic young undergraduates, collectively working towards the utopia near and dear to their hearts. This utopia was not that different from the idealistic "communist" community that numerous volunteers, such as Hongyuan, Luhan, and Ameng had joked to me, and this utopia was also where the volunteers themselves would want to live. Rao Hei told me that during the year he quitted ZY Project due to Niu Huang's oligarchic ways of management, he visited all the field sites just to secretly say goodbye to the schools, the volunteers and students, and most importantly, his youth. One of his closest friends told Rao Hei—and he told me so—that, after he painfully decided to quit ZY Project four years ago, it "felt like as if I [he]

aborted a child of my [his] own". Although Rao Hei jokingly agreed with Song-Song, another close friend he made in ZY Project, who commented that working in the organization for four years himself was "a waste of youth," he told me that he was thankful for the lessons he had learned with his six years of ZY Project. To this date, Rao Hei remains close with the students he had taught, the volunteers he had met, and the friends he had made in the organization. In this regard, never had ZY Project not been a part of his life; and I doubt whether ZY could ever disappear. Unlike Niu Huang, who is still working in the organization, Rao Hei has moved on in life. What remains unchanged, however, is his pursuit of that idealistic utopia, a place where students and teachers (professors) read and discuss books, issues, and events with a critical yet conscious frame of mind. Through him, I saw the naive yet idealistic utopia these young intellectuals had imagined, and how they were disillusioned by the mundaneness brought about by the economic development scheme of the ambitious Chinese state.

At the same time, I became close to Lei Chufang and Ren Zhong, among numerous other ZY Project students. As the earliest "classes" of ZY Project, they had already graduated from college and continued on with their pursuits in lives. They told me that they could not remember much from Rao Hei's or Niu Huang's classes from those summers some ten years ago; what they did remember by heart, though, was the alternatives, the possibilities that they saw in these "elder brothers." Having been following Niu Huang to learn about photo shooting and video editing, and helping out with ZY Project's various projects, Chufang once told me that she had "asked myself [herself] thousands of times, 'why me' but not the other students" with the $700 camera that Niu Huang lent her in her hand. When I told Ren Zhong that Niu Huang was already

proud of them because they had not fallen into the trap of the everyday mundaneness, I saw tears rolling down her face. Through these moments, I realized how important ZY Project had been to these students, and how much Chufang and Renzhong could be influenced by words of the young and passionate volunteers. Of course, these are only the few students that ZY Project "converted"; ZY Project and its volunteers did not, and was not able to, exert such influences on all the students that they had taught. This is the best reflection of the elitism and exclusivity that ZY Project embodies. Meanwhile, perhaps to them, this particular kind of elitism is inevitable, because not all can be "recruited" into the circle. Some radical ones would even say that, the circle is an exclusive one to begin with: the utopia they are striving for is simply not for everyone. Only those who hold great respect for free thinking, open dialogues, and real cosmopolitan learning are able to enter this realm. Moreover, by entering the realm, one would need to let go of the mundane matters in the modern society. But not everyone is born with the privilege to do so. The majority has to compromise, and that's why ZY Project has been co-opted into a bureaucratic institution, relentlessly focusing on outcomes, fundraising, recruitment, organizational influences, and its own "uniqueness" in the NGO circle.

As I write down these words when I left the field for a second time, the organization had just recruited a new group of long-term Fellows, built a few new ZY Project Spaces, and renewed strategic partnerships with a few other NGOs. Niu Huang is still traveling in major cities that host top universities and NGOs in China in the hope of driving the work of the organization forward. The volunteers that I have written about have mostly returned to their universities, to their normal and striving lives. They still repost ZY Project's fundraising and recruitment WeChat messages on their Moment

feeds. Some plan to revisit the school where they volunteered; some had already done so, for personal and/or professional purposes. Are they still working towards the alternative future? If so, can the detours that are being taken now eventually lead to the realization of such an ideal? More importantly, can this utopia ever be realized in this modern (and largely neoliberal) age? Again, to these questions, I don't have clear answers. Nor do my informants have any. Yet they would probably tell me, the fact that something is uncertain signals the possibility that it could become true sometime in the future. Perhaps, it is now appropriate to end this dissertation with the lyrics of the ZY Project song, the lyrics of which was written by the volunteers and students together in 2008.

This is a small, small place
With many big, big dreams
However, the goals look so far-fetched
That we have lost orientation
But if we keep trying and do not give up
Become stronger amidst setbacks
Finally there will be a day when you find you are wonderful

This is a big, big world
With many small, small yearnings
Occasionally, sweat crosses our eyes and murks our hope
We hold hands together and dash forward
And keep in mind that Friends are always by our side
Finally there will be a day when you find the direction you are running for

(Chorus)
We are similar-agers
Sharing the same sky
Experiencing the same rains
And will see the same rainbows

*I can see you are ready
You will succeed I believe
Work together forever
You and me

We are Friends (*Zhiyou)*[33]

We come from various places
Living in foreign countries, places far away from home
After numerous wordlessnesses and bewildernesses
Finally farewell to loneliness
The eyes of confusion have all turned
into genuine laughter
The tightly held hands are our wings

We live a lonely journey of challenges
To search for sunshine of the future
Those aggrievances and misery once upon a time
Are joking matters nowadays
From being absolutely alien to getting used to it
Facing all the difficulties on our own
The faith of our own is the greatest strength

(Chorus)
We are people of similar ages
Living under the same sky
We have witnessed rains
And will see rainbows together

*I can see you are ready
You will succeed I believe
Work together forever
You and me
We are Friends (*Zhiyou)*…

---

[33] Asterisked stanzas are originally in English.

Reference

Abowitz, K. K. (1999). Reclaiming community. *Educational Theory*, *49*(2), 143-159.

Adams, V. (2012). The other road to serfdom: Recovery by the market and the affect economy in New Orleans. *Public Culture*, *24*(166), 185-216. doi:10.1215/08992363-144360

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (revised edition). London, UK: Verso.

Anagnost, A. (2004). The corporeal politics of quality (*suzhi*). *Public Culture*, *16*(2), 189-208.

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Appadurai, A. (2013). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In *The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition* (pp. 179-195). Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

Bakken, B. (2000). *The exemplary society: Human improvement, social control and the dangers of modernity in China.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Banks, J. A. (1993). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Research in Education*, *19*, 3-49. doi:10.2307/1167339

Banks, J. A. (2008). Diversity, group identity, and citizenship education in a global age. *Educational Researcher*, *37*(3), 129-139. doi:10.3102/0013189X0831750

Bashkow, I. (2006). *The meaning of whitemen.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bregnbæk, S. (2016). *Fragile elite : The dilemmas of china's top university students.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Butin, D. W. (2005). Preface: Disturbing normalizations of service-learning. In D. W. Butin, (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education: Critical issues and directions* (pp. vii-xx). New York: Palgrave.

Butin, D. W. (. W. (2006). The limits of service-learning in higher education. *The Review of Higher Education, 29*(4), 473-498.

Cave, P. (2004). "Bukatsudō": The Educational Role of Japanese School Clubs. *Journal of Japanese Studies, 30*(2), 383-415.

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chan, K. (2004). The development of NGOs under a post-totalitarian regime: the case of China. In R. Weller (Ed.), *Civil life, globalization and political change in Asia: Organizing between family and state politics in Asia* (pp. 20-41). New York: Routledge.

Cororaton, C., & Handler, R. (2013). Dreaming in green: Service learning, global engagement and the liberal arts at a north American university. *Learning and Teaching, 6*(2), 72-93.

Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2001). On personhood: An anthropological perspective from Africa. *Social Identities, 7*(2), 267-283.

Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. L. (2012). Theory from the south: Or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa. *Anthropological Forum, 22*(2), 113-131.

236

Creswell, J.W. (2007). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five

    approaches (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dehart, M. (2012). Re-modeling the Global Development Landscape: The China Model

    and South- South Cooperation in Latin America. *Third World Quarterly,*

    33(7):1359-1375.

Dello-Iacovo, B. (2009). Curriculum reform and "quality education" in China: An

    overview. *International Journal of Educational Development, 29*(3), 241-249.

Deng, L. (2018). More and more *haigui*s are working in the Chinese NGO sector.

    People's Daily. Retreated from http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2018-

    04/07/content_1846393.htm?from=timeline&isappinstalled=0

Eliasoph, N. (2011). *Making volunteers: Civic life after welfare's end.* Princeton:

    Princeton University Press.

Erickson, F. (1984). What makes school ethnography 'ethnographic'? *Anthropology and*

    Education Quarterly, *15*.

Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative research on teaching. In M.C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook*

    of research on teaching. New York: Macmillan.

Fei, X. (1992). *From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society.* (G. Hamilton Trans.).

    Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Fechter, A. M., & Hindman, H. (Eds.). (2011). *Inside the everyday lives of development*

    workers: The challenges and futures of Aidland. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.

Fechter, A. (2011). Anybody at home? The inhabitants of Aidland. In H. Hindman & A.

    Fechter (Eds.), *Inside the everyday lives of development workers: The challenges*

    and futures of Aidland (pp. 131-150). Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.

Fleischer. (2007). "To choose a house means to choose a lifestyle." The consumption of

housing and class-structuration in urban china. *City and Societies*, *18*(2), 287-311

Fleischer, F. (2011). Technology of self, technology of power. Volunteering as encounter

in Guangzhou, China. *Ethnos, 76*(3), 300-325.

doi:10.1080/00141844.2011.565126

Fong, V. (2004). Filial nationalism among Chinese teenagers with global identities.

American Ethnologist, 31(4), 631-648.

Fong, V. (2007). SARS, a shipwreck, a NATO attack, and September 11, 2001: Global

information flows and Chinese responses to tragic news events. *American*

Ethnologist, 34(3), 521-539.

Fong, V. (2007). Morality, cosmopolitanism, or academic attainment? Discourses on

"quality" and urban Chinese-only-children's claims to ideal personhood. *City &*

Society, 19(1), 86-113. doi:10.1525/city.2007.19.1.8

Fong, V. (2011). *Paradise redefined: Transnational Chinese students and the quest for*

flexible citizenship in the developed world. Stanford, CA: Stanford University

Press.

Geertz, C. (1973). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In *The*

Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. New York, Basic Books.

Geng, D. (2008). Students setting out to alleviate "poverty of spirit" in rural China found

themselves transformed: Self-organized volunteerism among university students

for rural development. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(3), 72-84.

Goren, H., & Yemini, M. (2017). Global citizenship education redefined—A systematic review of empirical studies on global citizenship education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *82*, 170-183.

Government of the People's Republic of China. (2011). Retrieved from http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2001/content_60920.htm

Greenhalgh, S. (2009). *Cultivating global citizens: Population in the rise of China.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hail, H. C. (2015). Patriotism abroad: Overseas Chinese students' encounters with criticisms of China. *Journal of Studies in International Education.* doi:10.1177/1028315314567175

Handler, R. (2013). Disciplinary adaptation and undergraduate desire: Anthropology and global development studies in the liberal arts curriculum. *Cultural Anthropology, 28*(2), 181-203. doi:10.1111/cuan.12000

Handman, H., & Fechter, A. (2011). Introduction. In H. Handman & A. Fechter (Eds.), *Inside the everyday lives of development workers: The challenges and futures of Aidland* (pp. 1-20). West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.

Hannum. (2003). Poverty and basic education in rural China: Villages, households, and girls' and boys' enrollment. *Comparative Education Review*, *47*(2), 141-159.

Hansen, M. H. (2013). Learning individualism: Hesse, Confucius, and pep-rallies in a Chinese rural high school. *The China Quarterly, 213*, 60-77. doi:10.1017/s0305741013000015

Hansen. (2015). The temporal experience of Chinese student abroad and the present human condition. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, *3*, 49-77.

Hardt, M. (1999). Affective labor. *Boundary 2*, *26*(2), 89-100.

Harrison, E. (2013). Beyond the looking glass? "Aidland" reconsidered. *Critique of Anthropology*, *33*(3), 263-279. doi:10.1177/0308275x13490308

Heron, B. (2007). Negotiating subject positions, constituting selves. In *Desire for development: Whiteness, gender, and the helping imperative* (pp. 91-122). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

He, C. (2006). Nongovernmental organizations and the development of China's education. *Chinese Education and Society, 39*(1), 21-40.

Hickel, J. (2013). The 'real experience' industry: Student development projects and the depoliticisation of poverty. *Learning and Teaching*, *6*(2), 11-32.

Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: An ethnography of wall street.* Durham: Duke University Press

Hoffman, D. (1996). Culture and self in multicultural education: Reflections on discourse, text, and practice. *American Educational Research Journal*, *33*(3), 545-569.

Hoffman, D. M. (2013). Power struggles: The paradoxes of emotion and control among child-centered mothers in the privileged United States. *Ethos*, *41*(1), 75-97. doi:10.1111/etho.1200

Hoffman, L. M. (2010). *Patriotic professionalism in urban China : Fostering talent.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Holdsworth, C., & Quinn, J. (2011). The epistemological challenge of higher education student volunteering: "Reproductive" or "deconstructive" volunteering? *Antipode*, *44*(2), 386-405. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00844.x

Hollan, D. (2001). Developments in person-centered ethnography. In Moore, C. & Hathews, H. (Eds.), *The psychology of cultural experience* (pp. 48-67). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Holland, D. C., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). *Identity and agency in cultural worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Huang, S. (2013). Building China's nascent civil society: The roles of nongovernmental organizations. *American Anthropologist, 115*(3), 499-501.

Jethwa, D. (2006). *International volunteering and the Asian community (UK): Views, attitudes, barriers, needs.* Retrieved from Asian Foundations for Philanthropy, http://affp.org.uk/sites/affp.org.uk/files/Research%20report-%20Paropkaar.pdf

Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's school.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kim, S. W., Brown, K. -E., & Fong, V. L. (2016). Credentialism and career aspirations: How urban Chinese youth chose high school and college majors. *Comparative Education Review*, *60*(2), 271-292.

Kipnis, A. (2001). The disturbing educational discipline of "peasants." *The China Journal*, (46), 1-24.

Kipnis, A. (2007). Neoliberalism reified: *Suzhi* discourse and tropes of neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *13*(2), 383-400

Kipnis, A. (2008). Audit cultures: Neoliberal governmentality, socialist legacy, or technologies of governing? *American Ethnologist*, *35*(2), 275-289.

Kipnis, A. (2011). *Governing educational desire: Culture, politics, and schooling in china.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kleinman, A. (2011). *Deep China: The moral life of the person: What anthropology and psychiatry tell us about China today.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kleinman, A., and Kleinman, J. (1991). Suffering and its professional transformation: Toward an ethnography of interpersonal experience. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry, 15*(3), 275-301.

Kuan, T. (2015). *Love's uncertainty: The politics and ethics of child rearing in contemporary China*. Berkeley: University of California Press

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465-491

Ladson-Billings, G. (2014). Culturally relevant pedagogy 2.0: Aka the remix. *Harvard Educational Review, 84*(1), 74-84

Lambek, M. (2010). *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, language, and action*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Larsen, M. (Ed.) (2016). *International service learning: Engaging host communities*. New York: Routledge.

Lashaw, A. (2012). How progressive culture resists critique: The impasse of NGO studies. *Ethnography, 14*(4), 501-522. doi:10.1177/146613811246380

Levinson, B. (2000). The symbolic animal: Foundations of education in cultural transmission and acquisition. In Levinson, B., K. M. Borman, M. Eisenhart, M. Foster, A. E. Fox, & M. Sutton (Eds.), *Schooling the symbolic animal. Social and*

cultural dimensions of education, (pp. 13-24). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Levinson, B. A, & D. Holland. (1996). The cultural production of the educated person: An introduction. In B.A. Levinson, D. Holland, & D.E. Foley (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice* (pp. 1-54). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Levy, R., & D. Hollan. (2015). Person-centered interviewing and observation. In Bernard, H.R. and C. C. Gravlee (Eds.), *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Li, C. (2015). Trends in educational inequality in different eras (1940-2010) — A re-examination of opportunities in urban-rural education. *Chinese Education and Society, 48*(3), 163-182. doi: 10.1080/10611932.2015.1085772

Li, Z. (2008). Passion: Burning the west. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(4), 13-22. doi: 10.2753/CED1061-1932410401

Lin, J., & X. Sun. (2010). Higher education expansion and China's middle class. In Li, C. (ed). *China's emerging middle class: Beyond economic transformation.* Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution.

Lin, Y. (2011). Turning rurality into modernity: *Suzhi* education in a suburban public school of migrant children in Xiamen. *The China Quarterly*, *206*, 313-330. doi:10.1017/s030574101100028

Liu, X. (2002). Urban anthropology and the "urban question" in china. *Critique of Anthropology*, *22*(2), 109-132.

Liu, X. (2000). *In one's own shadow: An ethnographic account of the condition of post-reform rural China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Liu, X., & Gu, J. (2012). "Let's explore and learn together." *People's Daily.* Retrieved from http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2012-07/13/content_1081445.htm

Lou, J. (2010). The school wall crumbles: Pollution, townization, and the changing ecology of rural schooling in northwest China. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Lou, J. (2011). *Suzhi*, relevance, and the new curriculum: A case study of one rural middle school in northwest China. *Chinese Education & Society*, *44*(6), 73-86. doi:10.2753/ced1061-193244060

Lukka, P., & Ellis, A. (2001). An exclusive construct? Exploring different cultural concepts of volunteering. *Voluntary Action*, *3*(3), 87-110

Mangold, K. (2012). 'Struggling to do the right thing': Challenges during international volunteering. *Third World Quarterly*, *33*(8), 1493-1509. doi:10.1080/01436597.2012.69813

Merkel-Hess, K. (2016). *The rural modern: Reconstructing the self and state in Republican China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ministry of Statistics, People's Republic of China (2018). Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2017/indexch.htm

Mittermaier, A. (2014). Beyond compassion: Islamic voluntarism in Egypt. *American Ethnologist, 41*(3), 518-531. doi: 10.1111/amet.12092

Mosse, D. (2004). *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice.* Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.

Mosse, D. (2005). *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice.* London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press.

Mosse, D. (2006). Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 12*(4), 935-956

Mosse, D. (2013). The anthropology of international development. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 42*(1), 227-246. doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155553

Mosse, D. (2015). Misunderstood, misrepresented, contested? Anthropological knowledge production in question. *Focaal, 2015*(72). doi:10.3167/fcl.2015.72011

Muehlebach, A. (2012). *The moral neoliberal: Welfare and citizenship in Italy.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Murphy, R. (2004). Turning peasants into modern Chinese citizens: "Population quality" discourse, demographic transition and primary education. *The China Quarterly, 177*, 1-20

Nonini, D. M. (2008). Is China becoming neoliberal? *Critique of Anthropology, 28*(2), 145-176. doi:10.1177/0308275x0809136

Ong, A. (1999). The Pacific shuttle: Family, citizenship, and capital circuits. In Ong, A. (Ed.), *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Osburg, J. (2013). *Anxious wealth: Money and morality among China's new rich.* Stanford: Stanford University Press。

Paine, L. (1990). The teacher as a virtuoso: A Chinese model for teaching. *Teachers College Record, 92*(1), 49-81.

Patterson, R. (2006). Transnationalism: Diaspora-homeland development. *Social Forces*, *84*(4), 1891-1907. doi:10.1353/sof.2006.010

Pieke, F. N. (2014). Anthropology, China, and the Chinese century. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *43*(1), 123-138. doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030149

Postiglione, G. A. (1999). *China's national minority education: Culture, schooling, and development.* New York: Falmer Press.

Price, R. F. (1979). *Education in modern China*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Qiao, J. (2010). On the rural-urban disparity in access to higher education opportunities in China. *Chinese Education and Society, 43*(4), 22-31. doi: 10.2753/ced1061-1932430402

Rao, J., & Ye, J. (2016). From a virtuous cycle of rural-urban education to urban-oriented rural basic education in china: An explanation of the failure of china's rural school mapping adjustment policy. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *47*, 601-611. doi:10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.07.00

Rofel, L. (2007). *Desiring China: Experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Rolandsen, U. M. (2008). A collective of their own: Young volunteers at the fringes of the party realm. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, *7*(1), 101-129. doi:10.1163/156805808x33393

Rosen, S. (2009). Contemporary Chinese youth and the state. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *68*(02), 359. doi:10.1017/s002191180900063

Ross, H. (2006). *UNESCO EFA monitoring group report: Literacy education in China.* Paris: UNESCO.

Sanjek, R. (1990). A vocabulary for fieldnotes. In Sanjek, R. (Ed.) *Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Sanjek, R. (2014). Ethnography. In *Ethnography in today's world: Color full before color blind* (pp. 59-71). Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Saxenian, A. (2006). *The new Argonauts: Regional advantage in a global economy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Schattle, H. (2008). Education for global citizenship: Illustrations of ideological pluralism and adaptation. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *13*(1), 73-94. doi:10.1080/13569310701822263

Schein, L. (1994). The consumption of color and the politics of white skin in post-Mao China. *Social Text*, *41*, 141-164.

Seeberg, V. (1990). *Literacy in China: The effect of the national development context and policy on literacy levels, 1949-79.* Bochum: Brockmeyer.

Shieh, S. & G. Deng. (2011). An emerging civil society: The impact of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake on grass-roots associations in China. *The China Journal,* 65, 181-194. doi: 10.1086/tcj.65.25790563

Sigley, G. (2009). *Suzhi*, the body, and the fortunes of technoscientific reasoning in contemporary China. *Positions*, *17*(3), 537-566. doi:10.1215/10679847-2009-014

Smith, M. B., Laurie, N., Hopkins, P., & Olson, E. (2013). International volunteering, faith and subjectivity: Negotiating cosmopolitanism, citizenship and development. *Geoforum*, *45*, 126-135.

Sökefeld, M. (1999). Debating self, identity, and culture in anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, *40*(4), 417-448.

Stambach, A. (2017). Introduction. In Stambach, A. & K. Hall (Ed.), *Anthropological perspectives on student futures: Youth and the politics of possibility.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Song, Y., Zhang, M., Lou, J, Wang, C., & Xiang, X. (2017). *Report on the development of educational volunteerism in China*. Unpublished report.

Spindler, G. D. (1997). (Ed.) *Education and cultural process: Anthropological Approaches. (3rd Edition)*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press.

Spires, A. (2011). Contingent symbiosis and civil society in an authoritarian state: Understanding the survival of china's grassroots NGOs. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(1), 1-45.

Spires, A., Tao, L., & Chen, K. (2014). Societal support for China's grass-roots NGOs: Evidence from Yunnan, Guangdong and Beijing. *The China Journal*, *71*, 65-90.

Skinner, G. W. (1977). *The city in late imperial China.* Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing Inc.

Snee, H. (2014). *A cosmopolitan journey? Difference, distinction, and identity work in gap year travel.* Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate.

Sum, C. (2017). Suffering and tears: Authenticity and student volunteerism in postreform China. *Ethos*, *45*(3), 409-429. doi:10.1111/etho.1217

Swan, E. (2012). "I'm not a tourist, I'm a volunteer": Tourism, development, and international volunteerism in Ghana. In W. v. Beek & S. A. Schmidt (Eds.), *African hosts and their guests: Cultural dynamics of tourism* (pp. 239-255). Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Inc.

Tao Xingzhi Research Association. (2008). Serving in the construction of the new socialist countryside: An investigation of the nine-year voluntary teaching service of students from Shanxi and Xinzhou Normal College. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(4), 47-61.

Thogersen, S. (1990). *Secondary education in China after Mao: Reform and social conflict.* Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press.

Tobin, J., Davidson, D. H., & Wu, D. Y. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States.* Yale University Press.

Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tomba, L. (2004). Creating an urban middle class: Social engineering in Beijing. *The China Journal*, (51), 1-26.

Tomba, L. (2009). Of quality, harmony, and community: Civilization and the middle class in urban hint. *Positions, 17*(3), 591-616.

Tu, W. (1984). Pain and suffering in Confucian self-cultivation. *Philosophy East and West, 34*(4), 379-388.

Tu, W. (2000). Implications of the rise of "Confucian" East Asia. *Daedalus, 129*(1), 195-218.

Unger, J. (1980). Bending the school ladder: The failure of Chinese educational reform in the 1960s. *Comparative Education Review, 24*(2), 221-237.

Vigh, H. (2009). Motion squared: A second look at the concept of social navigation. *Anthropological Theory, 9*(4), 419–438.

Wang, Y. (2006). Value changes in an era of social transformations: College-educated Chinese youth. *Educational Studies*, *32*(2), 233-240. doi:10.1080/0305569060063115

Wang, Z., Yang, F., & Zhang, B. (2008). A survey analysis of college student volunteers in Hebei participating in the western China program. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(3), 42-49.

Weis, L. (1996). Foreword. In B.A. Levinson, D.E. Foley, & D. Holland (Eds.), *The cultural production of the educated person: Critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice* (pp. ix-xiv). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Weller, R. (2004). Introduction: Civil institutions and the state. In R. Weller (Ed.), *Civil life, globalization and political change in Asia: Organizing between family and state politics in Asia* (pp. 1-19). New York: Routledge.

Williams, R. (1976). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Willis, P. (1981/1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Woronov, T. (2003). Transforming the future: "quality" children for the Chinese nation. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago.

Woronov, T. E. (2008). Raising quality, fostering "creativity": Ideologies and practices of education reform in Beijing. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *39*(4), 401-422. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00030

Wright, A. F. (1977). The cosmology of the Chinese city. In Skinner, G. W. (Ed.), *The city in late imperial China* (pp. 33-74). Taipei, Taiwan: SMC Publishing Inc.

Wu, J. (2012). Performativity in China's ethnic borderlands: Ethnographic fragments in a

  rural Miao community. *The Michigan Journal of Asian Studies*, *1*(2), 79-88.

Wu, J. (2016a). *Fabricating an educational miracle: Compulsory schooling meets ethnic*

  rural development in southwest China. Albany: SUNY Press.

Wu, J., & Wenning, M. (2016). The postsecular turn in education: Lessons from the

  mindfulness movement and the revival of Confucian academies. *Studies in*

  Philosophy and Education, 35(6), 551-571. doi:10.1007/s11217-016-9513

Wu, Z., & Han, C. (2010). Cultural transformation of educational discourse in china:

  Perspectives of multiculturalism/interculturalism. In C. A. Grant & A. Portera

  (Eds.), *Intercultural and multicultural education: Enhancing global*

  interconnectedness (pp. 225-244). New York: NY: Routledge.

Xiang, Q., & Yun, A. (2009). On understanding the movement to send college graduates

  as volunteer teachers to western China. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(4), 23-

  46.

Xu, B. (2017). *The politics of compassion: The Sichuan earthquake and civic*

  engagement in China. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Yan, Y. (2003). Neoliberal governmentality and neohumanism: Organizing *suzhi*/value

  flow through labor recruitment networks. *Cultural Anthropology*, *18*(4), 493-523

Yan, Y. (2009). The good Samaritan's new trouble: A study of the changing moral

  landscape in contemporary China. *Social Anthropology*, *17*(1), 9-24.

  doi:10.1111/j.1469-8676.2008.00055

Yan, Y. (2010). The Chinese path to individualization. *The British Journal of Sociology*,

  61(3), 489-512.

Yan, Y. (2014). The moral implications of immorality. *Journal of Religious Ethics, 42*(3), 460-493.

Zhang, H. (2013). *John Dewey, Liang Shuming, and China's education reform.* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Zhang, L. (2010). *In search for paradise: Middle-class living in a Chinese metropolis.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Zhang, L. (2017). Cultivating the therapeutic self in China. *Medical Anthropology*, 1-14. doi:10.1080/01459740.2017.131776

Zhang Y., & Lin, J. (2008). Volunteerism in China (I): National policies, student responses, and two case studies of self-organized volunteer programs. *Chinese Education and Society, 41*(3), 3-13. doi:10.2753/ced1061-1932410300

Zhang, L., & Ong, A. (2008). *Privatizing China: Socialism from afar.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Zhao, G., & Deng Z. (2016). *Re-envisioning Chinese education: The meaning of person-making in a new age.* (Eds.). New York: Routledge.

Zhen, L. (2008). Passion: Burning the West. *Chinese Education and Society*, *41*(4), 13-22. doi: 10.2753/ced1061-1932410401

Zhou, H., & Shang, X. (2011). Short-term volunteer teachers in rural China: Challenges and needs. *Frontier Education in China, 6*(3), 571-601. doi: 10.1007/s11516-011-0146-y

Zigon, J. (2006). An ethics of hope: Working on the self in contemporary Moscow. *Anthropology of East Europe Review, 24*(2), 71–80.

Zigon, J. (2008). *Morality: An anthropological perspective.* Oxford and New York: Berg.