

## **Social and Political Dynamics and Their Impacts on Service-Learning in Mainland China**

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### **1. ABSTRACT**

Despite the abundant literatures on service learning case studies, it is rare to see cases related to Mainland China. Service-learning has become a very popular pedagogy in the United States and has been adopted in various areas in Asia in recent years. However the concept is still relatively new in Mainland China and comprehensive case studies are needed to provide practical guidance for practitioners and empirical data for theorist. This paper, based on a case study of service learning trip to a village in China, tries to demonstrate the social and political dynamics of doing service learning projects in Mainland China. It doesn't focus on the dynamics of launching a service learning course in a university, rather it provides descriptions and analysis of executing a service learning project in a village. The paper attempts to explain the social and political dynamics and their impacts on the service learning project by addressing the following questions in detail: how to work with a local partner, how villagers response to outsiders coming to the village and doing the project, how the government and other local social organizations play their role in the project, and under those special social and political circumstances, what impacts the service learning project can bring to a village as well as to the students.

Key Words: service learning, Mainland China, political dynamic, social dynamic

### **2. INTRODUCTION**

The service learning project discussed in this paper is not a curriculum-based service learning project, it is a residential college project designed to meet colligate learning goals. Although most scholars consider curriculum as a necessary component of a service learning program (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Howard, 1998; Butin, 2010), some scholars argue for a more general definition, e.g., Jacoby (1996) defines service-learning as

“A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflections and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning” (p.5).

He states that service learning can be either curriculum based or non-curriculum based. The non-curriculum based project usually designed for student's self-development (Jacoby 1996). The purpose of this project was to train teamwork, raise students' awareness of cultural reservation, promote cultural engagement, and nurture civic responsibility. Students are expected to learn teamwork skills, understand the cultural value of the round house, get to know the rural education problem and demonstrate willingness to help.

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### **3. THE PROJECT DESIGN**

This paper adopts the qualitative methods. Extensive interviews were employed to investigate the question in place and thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. A pre-trip investigation was organized to find out community needs and meet with relevant parties, including the local partner, the villagers, and the local government. 3 problems were identified as urgent needs in the community, namely, lack of environmental awareness and no garbage disposal system, lack of proper education for pre-school and primary school children, no preservation of the cultural heritage “round house”. Students, after discussion with the local partner, villagers and the government, designed the project together. The project had three components, namely, voluntary teaching activities, environment protection campaign and round-house repair. Throughout the process, the interaction with local organization was recorded and discussed, villagers were interviewed, and the response of the government officials and other social organizations were analyzed.

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

First of all, some of the learning goals were not easy to be met when doing service learning projects in Mainland China. The social awareness of service learning as a pedagogy is very low, even among the third sector organizations, which resulted in difficulties working with local partners. Local partners, villagers and government considered the project as a volunteer service project and treated students purely as volunteers. This created trouble when learning goals were in place but not understood by relevant parties. The local partner overlooked the students’ needs for learning and villagers didn’t want to teach students to do things because they thought students shouldn’t do dirty works such as repair the wall. They did most of the work by themselves instead of involving the students. A comprehensive discuss about the concept of service learning is needed when doing service learning project in villages in Mainland China.

Secondly, though the learning goals cannot be fully met, students had a strong impact on villagers and the community. Students’ presence in the village helping addressing problems was a catalyzer for igniting villagers’ passion for self-help. Chinese takes face “mianzi” very seriously. Before students arrived in village, the villagers cleaned the round house and the road very carefully and they wanted people to see the good side of them. When villagers saw students working hard to help repair the round house, they realized their own responsibility of making a better home. In our case, many villagers who now work in the cities donated to the round-house preservation and even went back to help. This is one of the effect that we didn’t expect to happen.

Thirdly, government’s involvement had both positive and negative impacts on the students and the village development. Local government has to be informed when doing service learning projects in Mainland China. When outside help was in village, the local government may utilize the opportunity of outside help to bargain with the township government to get resources which were not granted in the past. In this case, the garbage disposal system was eventually established by the government. The village head said the project made him easier to ask for resources from the upper-level government. But in return, the village head invited different groups to the village to get public attention and to satisfy the upper-level government’s need for evidence of achievement. There were unexpected government related visitors who never came to the tiny village before but suddenly appeared to take photo with the students to show their

care to the village during the project. The very superficial behavior disturbed the project and made students uncomfortable. But on the other hand, the phenomenon also provoked discussion among students. They learned to understand the social and political dynamics in rural China.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Though the social and political dynamics make the service learning project in China complicated, the overall impact on students learning and the local community was positive. Students get the opportunity to better understand the Chinese society and the community may get far-more benefit apart from the project. With good planning and preparation, the outcome could be very fruitful. But this is a single-case study, findings may not applicable to other cases when circumstance change. More cases and further exploration on this topic is needed in the future.

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