

**SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ACTION: LEARNING THROUGH  
FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS IN CHINESE SCHOOLS**

by

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Volunteering abroad has been growing in popularity over the past decade as a way for people of all ages to do something unique during their travels. While earlier research has looked at various elements and arrangements of international volunteering, this is the first study that specifically looks at young, foreign volunteers serving in Chinese schools. Profiling five volunteers from the United States and Europe, this paper aimed to understand the connections that are made between foreign volunteers and Chinese hosts and how these connections impact cross-cultural learning and social justice. Volunteer respondents indicated that their volunteering experience has modified their views on China and education, has taught them about the complex volunteer-recipient relationship, and will impact their future career or volunteer contributions. Analyzing the motivations, experiences, and reflections of these volunteers provides a model for international volunteering as a means toward social justice. The findings from this study are useful for understanding the multifaceted and evolving field of international volunteering in any context. To improve on the service learning experience for volunteers and their hosts, volunteers and their sending organizations should make particular effort to clarify volunteer-host communication, educate for mindfulness of the service setting, and emphasize a learning rather than a helping or fixing attitude.

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## **USE OF TERMS**

The terms used in this paper were chosen deliberately. Expressions including First World, Third World, developed, developing, and Western have been omitted from my writing, except in cases where I am quoting literature or research participants or describing specific geographic locations or historical concepts. My decision is based on these terms being outdated oversimplifications of reality. It is not that easy to categorize certain countries or regions as either developed or underdeveloped. Both good and bad conditions exist within the same country, city, and even neighborhood. Therefore, trying to categorize China as a developed, developing, or “Westernizing” country is irrelevant. The conditions in China, or any other country, are not uniform across the population. Using terms like developed, First World, or Western, therefore, only serve to distance ourselves from other people in the world.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early adulthood comes with a variety of different pathways and opportunities for most Americans, such as what kinds of education and careers to pursue and where to move, travel, and eventually call home. Young men and women alike often explore the world and make mistakes, without heavy pressure from their parents to root themselves right away in a job, house, or relationship. The situation is similar in Europe, where many teenagers take a year before attending or after graduating college to travel or work abroad. This trend is not exclusive to the young. Adults on both continents are saying goodbye to the banality of a four-year degree followed by an office job and instead are spending months or years pursuing graduate education or work overseas.

For some, their actions come from a desire to see the world and to feel adventurous. For others, the yearning to go abroad is complemented by their longing to help people in need. In many places in the world (including Europe and North America), children are not offered wide opportunity and instead are extremely restricted in what is possible for them. For example, girls and ethnic minority students in many countries are not even able to graduate from middle school. These two groups—the extremely mobile and the extremely restricted—come together through volunteering.

Volunteer tourists, foreign volunteers, gappers, eco-tourists—whatever you choose to call them—are rising in numbers, and groups ranging from for-profit travel agencies to faith-based

non-profits are taking advantage of the trend (Lough, 2010). Foreigners and tourists can volunteer in a wide range of sites such as schools, orphanages, health clinics, and ecological sites (Mowforth & Munt, 2008). The literature on this subject is widespread, covering the fields of international relations, peace studies, economics, sociology, tourism studies, anthropology, education, psychology, and more. As a graduate student in education, I have chosen to focus on two elements of learning in international volunteering: schools as volunteer sites and learning processes of volunteers.

I have chosen these two areas not only for the relevance to my plan of studies, but also for their importance in the field of international education. Globalization has motivated school systems around the world to enhance international programs, such as language and cultural studies, in the hope of building culturally competent students. Cultural competence or global citizenship is difficult to measure, but it is largely the ability to interact respectfully with people from different cultures and nations. The most direct way to influence students' intercultural skills is to make the classroom diverse. Foreign volunteers working in schools provide a small piece of this cultural diversity, especially in rural communities where local people rarely meet outsiders. The interaction between the two groups serves to build a more globally literate society. Furthermore, based on my personal volunteer experience in China and my regional focus in my graduate studies, I have narrowed the topic even further to focus on foreign volunteers working in schools in China.

## **1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand the experiences of volunteers in Chinese schools, the relationships they form with their students and community, and how they conceive of the impact of their service. My research question is: What kinds of connections are made between foreigners and Chinese through volunteering in schools, and how do they impact cross-cultural learning and social justice?

## **1.2 SIGNIFICANCE**

This question is important for many reasons. First, international volunteering is growing in scope and size, making research on experiences, impacts, and best practices valuable on a practical level. Service organizations could use this research to improve their services for both volunteers and host communities. Second, Chinese education is a popular, dynamic topic with great influence over current world affairs. American political rhetoric is full of references to the booming Chinese economy and globally competitive education system. The links that are formed between American volunteer teachers and Chinese students will shape the way China and the United States relate in the future, both politically and academically. Finally, globalization and economic interdependence have brought attention to wide gaps in prosperity and equality throughout the world, with wealth particularly concentrated in European-heritage nations. To help relieve suffering in low-income nations, wealthy powers have put money and resources into international development based on philosophies of social justice. International volunteering

plays a role by putting a human face on aid work and allowing for deeper human connections and mutual learning across cultures.

Additionally, the professional organization NAFSA: Association of International Educators has called for more research on international volunteering, asking: “How do we begin to categorize, count and analyze work and service abroad by young Americans in a yet-to-be-determined number of years after graduation with a bachelor's degree? Can we correlate work abroad programs with study abroad programs?” (Szekely & Klahr, 2002) I hypothesize that study abroad, an established educational endeavor, and service abroad are more similar and connected than previously imagined due to their focus on learning in cross-cultural contexts.

My contribution to this question will be five case studies of foreign volunteers currently serving (or recently finished their service) in Chinese schools, in the hope that other researchers will expand this research to other countries and volunteer sites. By learning about the motivations and experiences of volunteers, we can better understand the impact of cross-cultural learning on teachers and students, volunteers and hosts, rich and poor.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

No studies have specifically looked at all four of the elements I am researching: foreign volunteers, Chinese schools, cross-cultural understanding, and social justice. Therefore, it is necessary for me to pull together many different resources that contain elements of these topics in order to form the foundation for my research.

Many studies over the years have looked at the motivations and experiences of volunteers who serve in their home countries, including comparative studies looking at service trends in the United States versus Europe (Hodgkinson, 2003; Meijs et al., 2003). Communities on both sides of the Atlantic have long histories of volunteering through social organizations or religious groups (Hodgkinson, 2003). However, the literature on international volunteers, those who serve in a different country than their own, is slim. The small amount of research on international volunteering either looks at volunteers who are still in high school or college or volunteers who are near or at retirement age. My research will fill this gap by focusing on volunteers who are recent college graduates in their 20s, which in reality make up the largest number of international volunteers (Lough, 2010).

Some studies have attempted to correlate alternative travel or domestic volunteering with overseas service. Alternative travel is considered anything outside the norm of mass tourism and vacation resorts, such as backpacking, trekking, and hosteling. Ooi and Laing (2010) found that backpackers, a type of traveler mainly characterized by youth, hostels, and inexpensive activities,



are motivated to travel abroad to find adventure and experiences with cultures outside of their own. The authors extend this point to volunteer tourists, finding that backpackers are also interested in volunteering while they travel; therefore, the goals and motivations of the two groups are similar. Lepp (2009) and Stebbins and Graham (2004) look at the concept of volunteering as a leisure activity, finding that even though volunteering is considered work and therefore an obligation, people enjoy doing it. This is an important point in understanding why people would spend months or years living in challenging conditions to help strangers. Overall, studies show that volunteers are motivated to help others, to feel useful, and to give something back to the world (Stebbins & Graham, 2004). In my study I will use volunteers' stated goals to evaluate their outcomes. For example, I anticipate many volunteers' goals to be to improve children's lives, while the outcomes are actually improvements to the volunteers themselves.

The literature on Chinese education and its history and reforms is wide and is told from a variety of perspectives. Today, China makes the news constantly with stories ranging from its strict censorship to its educational and economic achievements. This combination makes it a fascinating case study in education, particularly when adding in the influence of foreign volunteers from democratic nations. Thousands of pages have been written about modern, post-Mao education in China, the expansion of international schools and foreign language education, and the inclusion of foreign teachers, but I was not able to find any literature about foreign *volunteers* serving in Chinese schools. It is still necessary to set the background for the Chinese educational system. Therefore, to narrow this topic, I have focused on describing elements that are involved in the volunteer teacher's experience: English language learning, the culture of testing, and traditional Chinese pedagogy.

Social justice and international development are broad topics with various subjects within. I review these areas briefly so to relate them to what I see happening in my research in the Chinese context. The idea of social justice, which was expressed by European and American philosophers, is related to the Chinese concepts of social harmony and reciprocity, in which equality and the collective good uplifts the society as a whole. A prominent goal of service programs is to encourage reciprocity, in that they aspire to mutual respect and learning between communities and visitors (Porter & Monard, 2001). In the Chinese context, service-learning for social justice is more commonly known as social practice or social responsibility (Xu, 2010). In practice, volunteering for social justice and social responsibility look the same, but the philosophical backgrounds have different origins. Chinese ideas of social responsibility are rooted in the desire to build a unified community. China is known as a collective culture (as opposed to an individualist culture) and voluntary service contributes to this collectivist philosophy (Xu, 2010).

But what China reveals today challenges the traditions of social harmony: extreme wealth and leisure contrasted with severe poverty and unequal opportunity. Volunteering provides a chance to reverse this inequality. What makes China such an interesting place to study service by foreigners is that some foreign volunteers do not see themselves as particularly useful; instead, they see the wealthy Chinese college students with leisure time as the most effective volunteers in the poorest areas of their country. However, the pockets of extreme poverty still pull foreigners to serve in China, and the Chinese seem to welcome them.

The role of foreign governments and non-governmental organizations in international development is never without controversy. Particularly in places like China, issues ranging from national pride to censorship can make foreign help unwanted or mistrusted by the government or

by local people. It is then particularly interesting to explore the extent to which the help of foreigners is desired and accepted in China, and how this influences quality of life and social justice in China. Can foreigners impact the massive wealth and educational gap in China? Is that an appropriate role for outsiders? Who determines their role? From what I have found, researchers and volunteer organizations are not asking these questions, but they are issues that foreign volunteers wrestle with each day.

Finally, tourism studies play a large role in understanding international volunteering, as many volunteer positions are short-term or happen in collaboration with a larger travel break or gap year. This means that interactions between volunteers and hosts may be extremely short, as little as a few days or weeks. However, all of the participants in my study have been living in China for relatively long amounts of time (more than three months), and as a result they all dismissed the concept of tourism as unrelated to their experiences.

Tourism studies nonetheless play a role in this research because of their use of anthropology and sociology to look at relationships and impacts that visitors have on a host population. Traditionally, mass tourism has eroded cultural relics and traditions, putting a price tag on ethnic goods and celebrations so that “culture” can be put on superficial display and owned by foreigners, who have little to no understanding of their worth or meaning. This has spurred a movement of alternative or sustainable travel, in which people make their travel choices conscientious of the people they are impacting, with less focus on consumption and more focus on learning. Gray and Campbell (2007) and Mowforth (2008) say that volunteer tourism is a chance for real interaction to take place between traveler and host as opposed to the one-way consumption of traditional tourism. The result of international volunteering can be mutually

beneficial learning, rooted in social exchange and social justice theories, which positively impacts both sides.

## **2.1 UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING**

Globalization has not only expanded worldwide trade and communication, but also the convenience and frequency of international travel. The growth of global tourism inevitably comes with moral, social, and environmental risks (Wearing, 2002). Tourism forces local cultures to defend or adjust their traditions, ecology, economy, and daily life. But the impact of foreign business and tourism is not purely negative; overseas visitors can also bring with them diverse ideas, cultural exchange, and most noticeably, commerce.

This context has fostered the concept of traveling with a conscience—being respectful of local traditions and the environment—known as sustainable tourism. Over the past two decades, sustainable travel has expanded into many options mostly aimed at wealthy, white tourists. Some travelers consider their treks sustainable if they exclusively patronize local businesses; others associate sustainability with neutralizing their carbon footprints by purchasing carbon offsets, planting trees, or through camping and natural activities.

A popular and growing form of alternative and sustainable travel is volunteer tourism, through which tourists contribute to the local community through service. This kind of tourism ranges from a one-day project, often arranged by travel agencies, to a multi-year commitment in the field, through programs like the Peace Corps. Projects can range from building houses to playing with orphans. This expanding practice of tourism is important to study because of its impact on international travel, cross-cultural understanding, and education.

### **2.1.1 Growth of sustainable travel**

To understand the rising popularity of international volunteering, it is first important to explore the motivations behind it. Volunteerism is a complex term with various definitions across cultures. In a study on perceptions of volunteering in eight countries, Meijs et al. (2003) found that most people agree that volunteers have free will to participate, gain non-monetary rewards, and work closely with the people they serve. All respondents indicated that serving food at a soup kitchen was volunteering. Any examples that included monetary payment or coercion were not described by respondents as volunteerism. However, there were some differences among the countries. Indian respondents, for example, said that teachers could not be considered volunteers if they help with after school activities, while European people said they could. This is probably due to the larger popularity of scouting and school clubs in Europe compared to India. This is an important point to consider when looking at international volunteering, where people from different societies come together with different perspectives and definitions of volunteer service.

Hodgkinson (2003) divides volunteering into four categories: mutual aid, philanthropy, advocacy, and participation. Tutoring or teaching would fall under participation. The author surveyed the rates of volunteering by adults in 47 countries, finding slight differences related to the history and political situations in each place. For example, countries in Eastern Europe had the highest rates of volunteering in sports clubs and coaching because during Communist rule it was the only allowed form of social assembly. In the United States, volunteering through religious organizations is very popular, which correlates with the high number of religious Americans. Hodgkinson suggests that the amount of freedom and wealth in a country does not affect the number of volunteers, but it does affect the type of volunteerism occurring.

Ooi and Laing (2010) attempt to answer the question of volunteer motivation by analyzing survey responses from backpacker tourists, a demographic of college-age travelers who generally stay in youth hostels, use inexpensive transportation, and participate in adventure activities. Compared to backpacking, volunteer tourism can more directly benefit the community. While backpackers may exclusively support local business owners, volunteers give back directly to their hosts, often through teaching or environmental restoration. This creates a two-way exchange: the hosts give volunteers a unique travel experience and the volunteers give their service in return.

Ooi and Laing found that backpackers and volunteers share common motivations: both want to have fun while at the same time intimately experience life in different cultures, in what is often known as a self-discovery period in a young person's life. Both groups regard their travel experiences as life-changing, opening up their eyes to the cultural diversity of our world. The authors also found that more than half of the backpackers surveyed were interested in volunteering while traveling, suggesting that more backpackers would volunteer if they were aware of the opportunity. Ooi and Laing's study also implies that the potential pool for international volunteers is wide; as the number of international tourists grows, so could the number of international volunteers (Ooi & Laing, 2010).

Volunteers may also find satisfaction through "the hero's adventure," a concept that Hudson and Inkson describe as international travel with difficult tasks resulting in personal development (2006, p. 307). The authors studied volunteers from New Zealand serving in Asia and Africa for up to two years. Most participants listed the desire to help others as their greatest motive, but the desire for adventure and self-transformation were also significant. While their sample included volunteers up to age 67, Hudson and Inkson determined that the younger

volunteers in their 20s talked the most about how volunteering has impacted them personally in a positive way. This means that despite any challenges, these volunteers came out of their placements feeling good about themselves, maybe even like heroes.

No form of sustainable travel would grow if it were not considered enjoyable. Multiple studies on volunteering and motivation have focused on the idea of volunteering as leisure (Lepp, 2009; Stebbins & Graham, 2004). Lepp used the example of volunteers in Kenya to analyze the relationship between obligation and leisure, finding that while volunteers do feel obligated to carry out their work, they also enjoy it. The key attraction to volunteer tourism is the rewards of obligation: volunteers reported feeling like more than just tourists due to their deeper relationship with their host communities.

Similarly, Stebbins and Graham categorize international volunteering as alternative leisure. In their book *Volunteering as Leisure; Leisure as Volunteering*, they explore the rewards of volunteering to show that service is more than “unpaid labor” (Stebbins & Graham, 2004, p. xiii). Volunteers report that learning from the host culture and learning about themselves are the strongest motivations to serve abroad.

However, this mutual learning process is complex. Throughout the history of international relations, the practice of wealthy and powerful people entering foreign communities with intentions to modify existing practices is an ethical grey area. The greatest fear from this relationship is the modern continuation of imperialism through powerful outsiders imposing their values and practices on people with less power. Stebbins and Graham state that this can be avoided by host communities and volunteer tourists being acutely aware of each other’s needs, desires, and expectations. Service takes place fundamentally in areas of poverty; therefore, it is

essential to address the way volunteers and the volunteer industry deal with poverty at every level (2004).

Leitgeb (2005) attends to this issue through exploring the utility of the poverty image. The volunteer vacation industry advertises with images of poverty on their websites and brochures: villages of tiny huts, children without shoes, and elderly people with dirty faces. These stereotypical images of the poor make potential volunteers feel empathy, which motivates them to serve.

This connection between image and motivation is potentially problematic for many reasons. First, the for-profit industry of volunteer tourism has been built around poverty; if poverty ceases to exist, so will the industry. Therefore, there is a concern that it runs counter to the volunteer industry's interest to eradicate poverty since poverty leads to their profit. It is important to note that there is no oversight of companies that recruit and send volunteers overseas; therefore, they are only accountable toward the people who buy their product, the volunteers (Mowforth & Munt, 2008).

In addition, images and descriptions of poverty portray the poor as uncivilized and simplistic people who are not able to solve their own problems. This continues a centuries-old false dichotomy between the superiority of white-European thought and dependency of non-white people. Finally, there is a risk that volunteer vacations do in fact create dependency. While volunteers are motivated by a desire to help, their solutions may only be temporary since volunteers are not actually development specialists (Leitgeb, 2005).

Over one million Americans have volunteered abroad every year since 2008, and up to 80 percent of them serve for eight weeks or less (Lough, Moore McBride, Sherraden, & O'Hara, 2010). With such short commitments, host communities must take the time out of their busy



schedules to train and orient new groups of volunteers every few weeks, putting a drain on their time and resources. At a study at a site in Peru where over 1,500 foreign volunteers have served, host staff said that their ideal volunteers would stay for at least six months and be conversational in Spanish. In addition, volunteers are not assigned to sites based on host needs; instead, they are assigned based on volunteer desires.

Because unskilled labor is not generally considered a sustainable solution to development—of which capacity building is fundamental, it may be difficult for short-term volunteers with poor language capacity or without relevant technical or professional skills to contribute significantly to sustainable development. (Lough et al., 2010, p. 13)

The case in Peru points out many important issues when considering best practices in international volunteering: length of time, volunteers' knowledge and language skills, and especially site needs. Communities around the world have reported foreign volunteers actually taking jobs away from locals and promoting projects that are unwanted or unsustainable (Mowforth & Munt, 2008).

The growth of sustainable travel, particularly international volunteering, places people from different walks of life at a new and fascinating crossroads. It was once only possible for young people to learn about the other side of the world through textbooks, military service, or wealthy parents paying for grand tours. Today, the option of volunteer tourism adds another opportunity for cross-cultural interaction and understanding (or misunderstanding), though often on the terms of the privileged outsider. The popularity of volunteer tourism suggests that this is the tourism of the future, as more people seek “authenticity” in their experiences and more off-the-beaten-path destinations, making it even more critical that this trend is analyzed fully.

### **2.1.2 Cross-cultural interactions**

The relationship between tourist and local is fairly straightforward; the tourist spends a limited amount of time in the local's backyard, having fun and relaxing. The local may be employed by the tourist industry or may just be in the background of the tourist's photographs. Whatever the scenario, it is uncommon for tourist and local to make meaningful, long-lasting connections. The volunteer tourism experience provides an alternative relationship, one of shared work toward a mutual goal through significant human connection. However, it is also possible for volunteers to leave behind negative impacts.

The goal of most international service projects is to exchange knowledge and build positive relationships between cultures. A small group of Americans on a service trip in Egypt is highly unlikely to impact U.S. relations with the Arab world. However, small transformations within individuals may gradually reduce stereotypes and oversimplifications of the other. Mutual learning, no matter how small the scale, can be a powerful force in cross-cultural relations (Howes, 2008; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007).

On the most basic level, learning is enjoyable. In McIntosh and Zahra's study of Australian teenagers volunteering with youth in a Maori community in New Zealand, both groups of young people were enthusiastic about their encounters. While just a short flight from one island to the next, the students assumed they and the Maori were from two completely different worlds. After their time together, both sides realized that they did not just enjoy the experience for its cultural newness, but for the strong friendships formed and similarities recognized. Both Maori and Australian students went away from the experience with positive feelings toward the other and a new appreciation for meeting people outside of their daily realm (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007).

Similarly, Howes found that relationships between hosts and volunteers were primarily positive. Howes concluded in his dissertation on British volunteers in Indonesia that the professional field of international development does not give enough credit to the voluntary sector. Volunteers, unlike development professionals, spend a lot of time learning from local people. In this way, volunteers gain respect from local partners and make progress toward successful, sustainable outcomes for their communities. Without this element of learning, international development remains in the hands of uninformed yet powerful outsiders (Howes, 2008).

Volunteer programs present the opportunity for stereotypes to be either reinforced or confronted. Traditional forms of tourism mainly reinforce stereotypes, through activities like cultural performances and displays of historic relics. These public displays are commodities to be purchased, photographed, and displayed by the tourists when they return home, rarely with any true understanding of their significance. Alternative tourism, rather, shows people as they really are as opposed to centuries-old stereotypes, such as in the case above of Maori people. Volunteers expected the Maori to wear traditional aboriginal clothing, when really they wear the same type of clothes as the Australians. Volunteer tourism reduces the production and purchase of “culture” for mass consumption, replacing it with realistic images and genuine interactions (Gray & Campbell, 2007).

Raymond and Hall claim that reducing stereotypes should be the focus of international volunteer organizations, above service and travel. If cultural stereotypes are not addressed, then they risk being assumed, accepted, and strengthened. It is important to note that simple contact between people of different cultures does not create automatic respect and understanding. If that were so, then traditional forms of tourism would produce much more culturally sensitive

participants. Likewise, people who volunteer only as a way to travel abroad, without any concern for or interest in the cultural experience, will not be affected by the positive aspects of alternative tourism (Raymond & Hall, 2008).

The way that international volunteers talk about their work affects their relationship with local people as well. Dekker and Halman distinguish the term “helping” from “serving” by what is being given; helping suggests handing out something that you own, while serving is giving of yourself. It is easy to identify the powerful side in a helping relationship as the person with the material goods. In a serving relationship, both volunteer and recipient grow from the interaction, neither one with an upper hand. Through interviewing volunteers in Mexico, the authors found that volunteers going into their placements with a serving attitude formed close bonds based on mutual learning, while those with helping attitudes remained at a distance from them (Dekker & Halman, 2003).

The volunteer-recipient relationship is never perfect or equal, as the vocabulary itself makes apparent. Volunteers have the power to take time out of their schedules to travel and serve, while the recipients are less mobile and therefore less able to make choices about leisure and cross-cultural education. The basis for volunteering is essentially about power: one side is recognized to have more need than the other. As Jorgenson points out, why do Thai college students not make the trek to Canada to volunteer in orphanages? (Jorgenson, 2009)

From this uneven power structure, it is understandable that volunteers are often expected to be more skilled than they actually are just because they are seen as “Western.” Palacios interviewed Australian volunteers in Vietnam who struggled with the high expectations placed on them by their hosts. The volunteers were still undergraduates, but their hosts expected them to have the knowledge to fix complex development issues. The Vietnamese adults had been taught,

perhaps from their colonial history, that “Western” knowledge is more valuable than local knowledge. In this case, both the local people and the volunteers had to confront their stereotypes and assumptions about power, knowledge, and culture in order to make any mutual progress (Palacios, 2010).

Even when power relations and stereotypes are acknowledged, the presence of outsiders in a community can still present long term challenges. Clifton and Benson analyzed ecotourism programs in Indonesia to learn about the local attitudes toward volunteers. The local people generally welcome volunteers, but not without first looking at the costs and benefits of their presence. In this case, Indonesian people noted their loss of privacy from outsiders. The benefit, however, is economic profit from tourists, a common reason for communities to establish tourism industries. It is important to note that while economic benefits may be visible, there are cultural costs to any form of tourism as well (Clifton & Benson, 2006).

There may be harmful aspects to cross-cultural interactions such as tourism, but it is unrealistic to think they can be avoided altogether. Globalization has made it so that we can reach most corners of the globe, either physically or electronically, making these encounters more frequent and prolonged. Instead of seeking isolation, it is essential to develop the tools for cultural respect and understanding. Volunteer tourism, despite its flaws, offers an important model for building positive relations between people, cultures, and nations.

### **2.1.3 Impact on education**

With the knowledge that volunteer tourism is a diverse field with potential for significant cross-cultural connections, the analysis will now turn to a specific area where volunteering makes a major impact: education. According to Agustin Velloso de Santisteban, an international

educational development expert, education is the area where non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have made the most progress (de Santisteban, 2005, p. 204). Education is a popular setting for volunteers, especially through opportunities for people from the English-speaking majority countries (United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, etc.) to teach English language classes to children. Volunteer programs large and small offer service projects as teachers, tutors, and orphanage caretakers. Twenty-two percent of overseas American volunteers work as tutors or teachers (Lough, 2010).

Education is also deeply connected to the practice of service. As discussed previously, service creates space for mutual learning and growth. Volunteers often talk about how much they gain personally from their experiences, even though the intention of their service is to give to others (Suh, 2009). This kind of mutual learning can take place in any volunteer setting. Schools, however, are a microcosm of a society, with all of its dreams, values, and flaws. Bringing foreigners into a classroom presents a unique opportunity for cross-cultural interaction and citizen diplomacy with potentially substantial outcomes. The difference between traditional tourism and alternative tourism is this element of learning (Mowforth & Munt, 2008).

In fact, some say that education should be the primary goal of volunteer trips abroad. Instead of “service learning,” we should refer to it as “learning service,” says Daniele Papi, who writes a blog about her work with NGOs and volunteer tourism in Cambodia. Papi uses her personal experiences over five years in Cambodia to debate and contemplate issues such as mistakes in development, responsible giving, and orphanage tourism. Through her writing, it becomes clear that she is passionate about ethical tourism and that she is dedicated to pushing the industry into responsible practice (Papi, n.d.). One of her strong criticisms of the volunteer tourism industry is that their projects are designed to make the volunteers feel good and not

necessarily to help communities. Instead of traveling with the goal of helping poor people, volunteer tourists should travel in order to learn. Without first learning what a community's needs are, outsiders cannot really help them, and to pretend otherwise is ethnocentric and arrogant (Garlick, 2011).

Service learning can also take place domestically, yet still in multicultural settings. Barnett and Rick describe their project with Stanford University students working in a Native American high school as mutual service learning. The college students gained experience teaching anthropology and guiding high school students in the college application process. In return, the high school students grew in their knowledge of anthropology and understanding of college life. Over an entire semester of living and working together, both groups closely learned about a different culture (Barnett & Rick, 1997). In this case, two groups of students engaged in a learning process that also satisfied practical needs of the other. This is an ideal example of how volunteering in schools can be reciprocally valuable and productive.

It is important to remember, however, that outsiders coming into schools can represent cultural dominance and unwanted change. Mutual learning and respect is neither instinctive nor guaranteed. In her chapter on the introduction of European education to the Huaorani people of Ecuador, Rival explains how the transmission of an outside culture interrupts traditional forms of community learning. In this case, foreign teachers represented dominant identities and modern civilization, and the local community was compelled to respond to their presence by reintroducing traditional ways of learning (Rival, 2000). This is an important point in the subject of international volunteering in schools; the subjects, pedagogy, and concepts that volunteers teach will not make as much difference as their presence itself. As the primary molding

institution of future generations, schools are an extremely sensitive place for a community, and the introduction of outsiders is guaranteed to incite emotions.

#### **2.1.4 Conclusion**

The subject of international volunteering encompasses sensitive and powerful issues such as globalization, cultural tradition, knowledge, race, imperialism, and international relations. Because it is still a relatively small and new industry compared to typical international development and NGO entities, there is much room for debate, change, and growth. International volunteering programs have great potential for positive change in the way people and cultures interact, but only if they actively address the complex issues among which they have placed themselves.

## **2.2 CHINESE EDUCATION IN TRANSITION**

Forty years ago, the Chinese education system hardly existed. Today, students in Shanghai outperform the rest of the world in math, science, and reading (Barboza, 2010). No society in history has changed this dramatically in such a short amount of time, to the point that China now rivals the United States in economics, education, and innovation. At the same time, massive inequalities remain within China, the world's most populous nation. Millions of Chinese children are far behind the students of Shanghai, which is one of China's largest and wealthiest urban areas. The changing curriculum and pedagogy, including a strong focus on English language



ability, has both propelled Chinese education forward and widened the gap between rich and poor, making the education system a crucial place to start understanding the future of China.

From the American perspective, it is hard to avoid hearing about China in the news media, whether it is a debate over human rights, monetary policy, or environmental degradation. Americans of various levels of knowledge on the subject readily express their concern over growing Chinese power and its impact on life in the United States. Some have taken the open approach of learning Mandarin Chinese, the fastest growing language of study in American schools (Dillon, 2010). Some of these same students are part of the growing number of study abroad participants headed to China. In 2009, China was the fifth most popular destination for college students to study for a semester, summer, or academic year and the top destination outside of Europe (Open Doors, n.d.). Chinese students have been coming to the United States for different levels of university degrees since the 1980s, but now the exchange of students between the two nations is becoming more equal. The connection between American and Chinese youth—and the education systems they are shaped by—will significantly impact the future of our world.

### **2.2.1 Chinese educational reform**

Chinese education was isolated from the rest of the world for hundreds of years, allowing it to retain ancient Confucian values and methods throughout multiple dynasties. This shifted after the first Opium War in the 1840s, when missionaries from European countries made their way into Chinese port cities (Turner & Acker, 2002). Traditionally, acceptance to Chinese schools throughout history was based on merit measured by exams, although restrictions to women and minorities remained for centuries. Records from 2,000 years ago show that standardized exams

were taken by young males who aspired to careers in public service, law, and teaching (Lee, 1999). The exam evolved over time from one dynasty to the next, but is collectively referred to as the civil service examination. Any male could sit for the exam, no matter his level of wealth or family trade. While the traditional imperial examinations ended in 1905 (Turner & Acker, 2002), this standardized testing system is the foundation of Chinese education and can still be seen today in their intense, nine-hour long college entrance exam (Lafraniere, 2009).

Along with standardized testing, the Chinese education system is known for its centralization and strict regulation by the central government. Before the 1950s, all Chinese schools were designed to be alike, with tracking systems, vocational education, and exams that qualified students to move up to the next grade. However, this arrangement left behind many rural children and girls who did not fit into the strict structure (Hannum, Park, & Cheng, 2009). The rise of the Communist Party starting in 1949 changed the drastic inequality. With the goal of “eliminating class differences,” Chairman Mao Zedong and the Communist Party expanded educational opportunities to rural students and girls (Hannum et al., 2009, p. 2). However, this came at a price. Quality plummeted, as the government put more emphasis on Communist Party ideology than academics. By the late 1960s, Mao’s extreme policies during the decade-long Cultural Revolution banned books, closed most schools, imprisoned many teachers, and sent urban-dwelling children to the countryside to work on farms.

It was not until Mao’s death in 1976 and economic reforms of the late 1970s that education began to recover from this destruction. China’s new leader Deng Xiaoping modernized the economic system to include market-driven business as opposed to completely state-controlled industry. Schools reopened, universities expanded, and the education system was decentralized. Living standards climbed along with literacy rates and secondary education

attainment. Technical training and science was promoted at the secondary level to help modernize Chinese industry (Hannum et al., 2009).

However, education reform and decentralization was not the solution for all of China's youth. By taking the direct power over the school system away from the central government, individual provinces and cities became responsible for much of their own education funding. This meant that affluent urban areas were able to fund their schools more easily than rural areas, creating a gap between regions across China. In 1986, school became mandatory up to grade nine for all children, and the government gave special attention to increasing rural enrollment and retention. Results have been mixed, and many promises are yet to be fulfilled. Educational reforms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are focused on pedagogy. Noting the strengths of North American and European students, China is now putting more emphasis on student-centered learning and critical thinking skills. However, high-stakes standardized testing is still the norm, and changing traditional pedagogy in rural areas is particularly challenging (Hannum et al., 2009).

### **2.2.2 Inequality in education**

Students living in different regions of China can experience various ranges of school quality and educational proficiency based on their location. The largest ethnic group, Han Chinese, has much higher rates of high school attendance than minority students. This group also makes up the majority of urban residents. Western regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang are the furthest behind the Han for reasons ranging from linguistic differences to agricultural lifestyles. But moving to cities does not necessarily improve the status of rural and minority students; children of migrant families are treated as second-class citizens when it comes to education in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen (Wen Li, Park, & S. Wang, 2007).

While the inequitable gender divide is a major concern in education worldwide, especially for rural and ethnic minority girls, the gap between urban and rural is more pronounced in China. Rural populations have been left behind as a result of the decentralization of schools as well as the recent mass migration of the Chinese people to urban areas (Holsinger & Jacob, 2009). In 1980 the urban population of China was at 19 percent; by 2005, 43 percent of people lived in cities (Hawkins, Jacob, & Wenli Li, 2009). Industry, business, higher education, and the middle class have flourished in China's major cities, especially around port cities on the coast. The western regions, mostly covered in mountains and desert, are not as convenient for the rapid construction and transportation that has swept over the east. This gap in wealth and development contributes to the greatest inequality in Chinese education: infrastructure (Wen Li et al., 2007). Rural schools are often crumbling and unsanitary, making school a very uncomfortable and unattractive place for young people. In order to improve rural schools, the central government must send extra funds to areas that cannot solely support their schools with local taxes.

Family and cultural influences also keep rural and minority children out of school. While urban students consider attending college, rural students struggle to complete middle school (Wen Li et al., 2007). For children in rural areas who plan to continue their family traditions of agricultural professions, it is more practical and profitable to work on the farm than it is to go to school. Parents encourage these children to work to support the family and to learn family trades. Alternatively, some rural children move to urban areas to work and send money back to their families. These decisions often depend on the child's characteristics. Based on survey data from rural Gansu Province, parents reflect over their children's performance in school and how much they enjoy it, letting their most academically talented children stay in school (Hannum & Park,

2007). About half of the children in the families surveyed aspired to go to college, and boys and girls performed similarly in math and reading. The strongest predictor of educational attainment for rural children is the mother's education. The more educated the mother, the more she pushes her children to stay in school, especially her girls. This shows how strongly family influences educational attainment of rural Chinese youth.

Chinese culture and history is made up of dozens of different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups. There are over 110 million ethnic minority Chinese citizens spread out across the nation (Postiglione, 2007). While some minorities live in cities side by side with majority Han, there are still areas of China that are populated mainly by minority groups. The autonomous region of Tibet is the most internationally recognized and historically contentious of these areas. Today, Tibetan children hold some of the lowest educational attainment in all of China. Tibetans often start school late, at age six or seven, and leave school early to start working. Most families live in rural areas, making it difficult for children to commute to school. Surveyed parents indicated that farming and raising livestock were the main reasons why rural children chose to drop out of school (Postiglione, 2007); because of this, only 56 percent of surveyed families sent their children to school.

Tibetans and other minorities in China face linguistic and religious conflicts as well. School is conducted in Mandarin, the official language of the Chinese government. For children who speak other languages at home, learning Mandarin threatens their connections to their history and culture. In a survey of Tibetan parents, respondents indicated that they wanted their children to be fluent in reading and writing the Tibetan language (Postiglione, 2007). Even when schools do offer bilingual education, Mandarin is clearly presented as the dominant language of success. In order for Tibetans to attend college, they must pass the same intensive entrance

examination as the native Mandarin speakers in eastern China. Religious background can also complicate the applicability of a national curriculum. Practicing Buddhists and Muslims in western China may find it difficult to accept and learn the Communist Party philosophy that is taught to all students (Postiglione, 2007).

To improve educational quality and access for Tibetans and other Chinese minorities, the central government has instituted boarding schools, native-language textbooks, and ethnic minority teachers colleges. For students who aspire to go to college, extra points are added onto their entrance exam scores if they are officially recognized as an ethnic minority. In Tibet, some schools have decided to pay students for good attendance at school (Postiglione, 2007). While these endeavors are constructive, it is essential that the central government also designate funds for essential infrastructure like run-down school buildings, teaching supplies and materials, and school management.

Rural areas are not alone in their struggle to keep children in school. Finding a quality place for all migrant children to learn is one of the greatest challenges in urban China today. There are approximately 20 million migrant children in major cities across the country. It is impossible to accurately count them because they do not legally exist as city residents. Every Chinese family holds a card that identifies where they legally reside. This system, called *hukou*, means that when people move they must register for permanent residence in the new city. With so many rural families crowding into overflowing cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the government does not grant residency to the majority of them under the assumption that migrant families will not stay for more than a few months (Chen & Liang, 2007). However, migrant families are staying much longer, and their second-class residency is extremely damaging to their children.

Domestic migration is a relatively new phenomenon in China. In 1982, only 7 million people were considered floating migrants; in 2000, this number jumped to 79 million. In 1996, Beijing estimated that there were 3 million migrants living in the city, and in 2000 Shanghai placed their number around 4.4 million. These high figures of unofficial city residents put an extreme burden on urban school systems. To pay for this burden, schools charge extra fees to migrant families (Chen & Liang, 2007).

Despite the financial support from national and local government, nearly every school in China charges attendance fees. For migrant families who do not make much money in the first place, school fees are exorbitant; adding on extra fees for being non-residents becomes unbearable. High expenses have forced some children to drop out of school. Half of the migrant children in China are considered behind their grade level in school, and 10 percent of migrant children do not attend school at all. Others have found schools specifically made for migrant students, which charge more manageable fees. Technically these schools are illegal since they are run outside of the national school system, often by NGOs. To the city government, however, having someone else deal with the migrant student problem may be a relief. In 2002 there were 519 migrant schools in Shanghai, 200 in Shenzhen, and 200 in Beijing, but these numbers are always unofficially growing. Migrant schools specialize in the emotional problems that many migrant children face, such as low self-esteem caused by teasing and loneliness caused by their itinerant lifestyle. Migrant schools use different textbooks than the mainstream schools, which can make it difficult for students trying to compete against the majority of students in the college entrance exams (Chen & Liang, 2007).

The government has recognized the problems of uneducated migrant children, and it is in the nation's interest to keep these children from falling into poverty, homelessness,

unemployment, and crime. Some provinces have changed their laws to allow migration within their province; for example, a family moving from rural Guangdong Province to the major city of Shenzhen would receive Shenzhen residency because they still reside in Guangdong Province. But this does not cover the millions of families living in Beijing and Shanghai, since both of those cities are not located within provinces. Additionally, nearly 23 million children were left behind in 2000 when their parents left home to find work elsewhere. These children end up being raised by other family members, but the stress and sadness of not seeing their parents can make them likely to drop out of school (Chen & Liang, 2007). To fully address the educational problems faced by migrant families, the government must improve the job conditions that force families to move to cities, along with the legal issues that make it so difficult for migrant children to go to school in their new homes.

### **2.2.3 Convergence of East and West**

Although Chinese students have been attending college in North America and Europe in large numbers for over three decades, the pedagogy and philosophy of education between Western and Eastern culture has remained disconnected (C. Li, 2005). Traditional Chinese education relies on memorization and testing, as demonstrated by the long history of exams. Western education, alternatively, has encouraged more creativity and critical thinking than memorization and repetition. More recently, both sides have indicated interest in adopting some aspects from the other. For example, the American education system has started embracing standardized testing as a way to improve work ethic and academic achievement (Rosenthal, 2010). In contrast, Chinese parents have become fascinated with fostering creativity in and outside of the classroom (Tatlow, 2011). Beyond pedagogy, learning one another's languages has also become a major movement



on both sides, particularly when considering the social and professional esteem of the English language in China.

English language ability has been highly respected in China since the late 1970s because of the attractive job opportunities for bilingual people in a globalized economy. In order for Chinese students to attend college, they must prove intermediate English ability on the national examination. In 2009, English was one of the top eight majors of Chinese college students (Ya, 2010). Elementary school students are also being encouraged or even required to learn English, depending on their location. In 2000, the estimated number of Chinese students learning English was 200 million, with English teachers numbering over 1 million (Simpson, 2008). Beijing's school system intends to teach English to all students starting in kindergarten. Xi'an, a large city in northwest China, plans to have half of its residents know 900 English sentences by year 2020 (China Daily, 2010). Despite these enthusiastic plans, English degrees no longer a guarantee graduates a good job. English departments expanded too fast in the 2000s, producing too many graduates of questionable quality. Universities report that since 2007, it has been very hard for their English majors to find employment after graduation. Instead, students who major in a professional area as well as master the English language are now attractive to employers (Ya, 2010).

For the young students still excited by the prospects of speaking the language of international communication, a native English speaker is the ideal teacher. Chinese people hold teachers in a high social position no matter what their subject is, but the status of native-speaker English teacher is nearly superhuman. Unsurprisingly, there are very few native English speakers available to teach the millions of children in China. But the number is growing every year (Zhang & Watkins, 2007). For those foreign teachers who do accept the relatively low salary in

China, the experience can be quite rewarding. Some teachers find themselves the first foreigner that their students have ever met. The growing presence of foreigners as English teachers has also introduced new teaching techniques to China, like games and group language practice (Gordon, 2002).

However, many foreign teachers have reported “cultural conflict” in classrooms where students have different expectations for how the teachers should teach (Simpson, 2008). The popular distinction between Western and Chinese pedagogy is that of creativity versus memorization. When Deng Xiaoping invited foreign teachers to teach English in China in the late 1970s, he expected them to improve English language ability—not to change Chinese pedagogy. But teachers naturally brought their own teaching styles from around the world, especially focusing on communicative methods of learning English, which is dominated by the idea of creativity. Before that, students learned English by translating and memorizing quotes from Mao’s speeches or little red book, leaving no room for creativity or cultural education in English (Simpson, 2008). Furthermore, high-stakes testing does not have the ability to measure creativity. Teachers are most concerned about their students passing examinations, leaving little room in the curriculum for oral proficiency and creativity.

Simpson’s study on foreign teachers of English in China looks at specific complaints and expectations that teachers and students express. For example, teachers complain that their Chinese students do not speak up in class, cheat, and do not think for themselves. On the other side, students criticize their foreign teachers for not meeting with them after class, for being disorganized, and for not having enough knowledge. It is clear that both sides have a hard time understanding one another while still expecting the other to conform to their expectations. It is easy to say, then, that Chinese and Western school culture are totally different. However, surveys

of student attitudes in the United Kingdom and China show that students have very slight differences. This means that instead of the differences being inherent to the cultures, teachers from the United Kingdom, for example, arrive in China with preconceived notions about cultural difference, which only serves to exacerbate small challenges into larger ones (Simpson, 2008).

Zhang and Watkins asked college students to write essays about their ideal English teacher. Chinese students said they want their teachers to tell them the right answers and to be good moral examples. The researchers also asked 20 Chinese and 20 foreign teachers about what makes for a good English teacher. The foreign teachers indicated that diversity in activities and being adaptable to change were the most important, while Chinese teachers cared most about proper teaching techniques and the teacher's knowledge. Both foreign and Chinese teachers wanted more interaction and cooperation with each other. The authors suggest that more communication among these groups would satisfy their desire to learn from each other and positively affect their students (Zhang & Watkins, 2007).

Beyond cultural misunderstandings, Chinese schools can run into trouble with non-professional foreign English teachers, people whose only qualification to teach English is that they are native speakers. These "adventure seekers" are usually more interested in living abroad than building a career in teaching (Simpson, 2008, p. 387), which means their effectiveness as teachers is low. As native English speakers, these teachers may assume that teaching is easy and does not require training or study. This attitude is condescending to other teachers who have spent their careers improving their skills. Some teachers have suggested that hiring non-native English speakers as English teachers would be better for Chinese schools. Teachers who have also been students of English are able to relate from the position as learner (Simpson, 2008). Relating in one way or another is important if language education is to impact cross-cultural

understanding. If learning and openness is the focus on both ends, foreign teachers and Chinese students can succeed in “sharing knowledge, spreading goodwill, and enabling mutually beneficial globalization” (Simpson, 2008, p. 389).

Not all Chinese people are thrilled with the growing popularity of English. Since it takes years of study to master the written characters of Chinese, some parents and educators fear that teaching English at a young age will harm children’s literacy in Chinese (China Daily, 2010). The law currently requires schools to start some English instruction at age nine. The effects of studying English as young as age five are not certain, but the practice is growing in China nonetheless. A 2000 evaluation of English immersion classrooms in Xi’an suggests that early English improves English ability and does not change in Chinese ability, but it lowers achievement in other subjects like history and science (Knell et al., 2007).

Others fear broader repercussions such as the dissolution of Chinese language and culture (Simpson, 2008; J. Wang, 2010). The global popularity of English has pushed smaller languages to the point of endangerment; English has also become the de-facto second language over local dialects, pulling children away from their cultural roots and traditions (Flinn, 2000). For example, children growing up in Shanghai today are more likely to speak Mandarin and English than their local Shanghainese dialect. With the majority of the world’s people living in China, there is no shortage of Mandarin speakers today. However, as more people learn English, the vocabulary manages to seep into conversational Chinese, prompting some to fear a slow but steady corruption of the Chinese language. English is no doubt going to be a part of China’s education system and workforce for years to come.

#### **2.2.4 Conclusion**

The education of the world's largest youth population will impact our world in countless ways. From the struggles of migrant families to the politics of English education, China's educational issues are not that different from our own in the United States. Their domestic migrants are our Hispanic immigrants; their language curriculum reform is our national standards reform. China has yet to produce a fully educated and literate population, but looking at their pace of development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not unreasonable to expect this to change in the next few decades. Due to China's vast size, economic influence, and demonstrated commitment to development and innovation, understanding the perspective of and collaborating with Chinese students and educators is essential for our global future.

### **2.3 SOCIAL THEORIES AND INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERING**

Just as ethical issues are debated within the fields of tourism, charity, and international development, international volunteering elicits many moral concerns and theoretical analyses. The greatest fear about international volunteering is that it contributes to modern imperialism and neo-colonialism. This is partly due to tourism's roots in imperialism. There are travel destinations all around the world, but most of the ownership remains in the hands of Americans and Europeans. For example, resorts in Asia and Africa may employ local people, but the majority of the profits go back to American owners and away from the communities they depend on for their profits. It is hard to consider this kind of relationship fair.

Imperialist attitudes and behaviors would create the exact opposite conditions that volunteering promotes: a world without poverty, inequality, and injustice. Volunteer tourism organizations, therefore, ideally would openly work against imperialism and neo-colonialism. Social justice theories provide exemplary guides for the process and outcome of international volunteering. Human capital, social capital, and social exchange theories also support beneficial results, although with less of an anti-imperialist viewpoint.

### **2.3.1 Neo-colonialism and imperialism**

As was discussed in section 2.1, the issue of poverty in volunteer tourism is sensitive and significant. Colonialism and imperialism have been both the cause and the result of poverty. For centuries, empires such as the British, French, and Spanish settled in foreign lands and exploited the people living there for economic profit, destroying traditional social and economic structures. Christian missionaries could be considered the very first international volunteers, improving access to education and health—as long as people went to church, too (Moore McBride & Daftary, 2005). Even after the missionaries and colonizers departed, the feeling of dependency and powerlessness remained in their place. Nations especially in Asia, Africa, and South America, labeled as “developing” or “third world,” still struggle today to repair the damages done to their societies by colonialism and foreign dominance. As a result, they have been easy targets of modern imperialism, controlled by and attending to the world’s economic and military superpowers.

Volunteering in post-colonial countries creates the risk of sustaining the attitude that people outside of the Euro-American world are underdeveloped and uncivilized. “Current trends emphasize mutuality, accountability, and participation by host communities, but against a

historical and contemporary backdrop, inequality remains between the volunteers and hosts” (Moore McBride & Daftary, 2005, p. 1). The “helping” attitude that is advertised by so many volunteer vacation companies presents the local people as uneducated and simplistic. The danger from this is that instead of serving communities, volunteers are just tourists of poverty (Leitgeb, 2005). While it is argued that touring poverty is a form of education for advocacy (Garlick, 2011), that is not how volunteer vacations advertise themselves. Advertisements make it clear that volunteers will make a difference in people’s lives. The question becomes: is the difference positive or negative?

Post-colonial theorists argue that the difference is negative. Modern imperialism divides the world by whose knowledge is valued and whose is not. In the case of volunteer travel, the Euro-American volunteer’s knowledge is clearly valued more than the local; otherwise, why would the volunteer be there? Volunteers with agendas or plans to fix communities project their own standards on the local people, including what defines success, what poverty looks like, and who makes decisions. American educators have coined the term “global citizenship” as the quality of being experienced with and sensitive to other cultures. However, the majority of people in the world have little say in this process or what defines it. Thus, it seems that global citizenship is actually accomplished by projecting the values of one small but powerful group on the rest of the globe (Jorgenson, 2009).

These pessimistic views are not necessarily complete reality, but recognizing these concerns is essential for volunteer organizations to keep themselves in check if they are to act in the people’s best interest. Volunteers must also individually ask themselves what their purpose and goals are for going abroad. Critics argue that too often the volunteer tourist’s real goal is adventure and self-promotion. Peers and potential employers may find it very impressive to hear

that a young person has spent time in the “developing” world, encountering poverty and disease and living to tell about it. International travel has long been considered a rite of passage for young people looking to find independence and inner strength (Ward, 2007). The problem with combining rite of passage tourism with volunteering in impoverished communities is that the poor become a commodity. Instead of actually helping people who need it, volunteer tourists may be unintentionally exploiting the poor in order to gain respect and power back home (Jorgenson, 2009).

This kind of exploitation is the core of imperialism. But in this case, the manipulation is not necessarily the fault of the actors on the ground—the volunteers. Instead, the volunteer vacation industry may be to blame. In 2005, the worldwide volunteer travel industry was valued at around \$9 million. For 2010, the predicted market value was up to \$30 million (Ward, 2007). With this kind of profit, it can be tempting for volunteer tourism companies to quickly expand volunteer sites without following ethical procedures. To empower volunteers to impact the industry, many have called for volunteers to intensely research the optional programs before making a decision and paying the hefty registration fees. Websites such as Ethical Volunteering ([www.ethicalvolunteering.org](http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org)), Coyote Communications ([www.coyotecom munications.com](http://www.coyotecom munications.com)) and Volunteer Options ([www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org)) help guide potential volunteers in asking essential questions and making smart decisions.

### **2.3.2 Social justice theory**

For those who believe in the virtuousness of volunteering in any setting, as well as for those who recognize the problems, social justice theory provides a map of ethical practice. Social justice is the product of examining and evaluating concepts of justice and how they are applied to different



groups. Social justice in action is seen when people work against inequality (Chapman & West-Burnham, 2010). Ideas of fairness and lawfulness have historically been defined by the elite, leaving powerless people with little voice in the direction of their lives. Acting through a social justice lens would place community needs over those of the individual, and minority voices equal with the dominant group (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007).

Social justice theory proposes that it is the responsibility of the wealthy to help the poor and the powerful to protect the marginalized. In a way, the people themselves perform acts of justice to benefit overall society and build a new ethical social structure.

A challenging task before us is developing a process by which historically emergent principles of justice may find arenas for their discussion, resolution, and implementation in a changing historical order, especially the new global order, with a simultaneous sensitivity to difference and commonality and subsequent practices that carry through what has been implemented without disenfranchising persons and/or groups. (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007, p. 2)

Many philosophers and academics have contributed to the foundations of social justice over time. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jean-Jacque Rousseau described human nature as cooperative rather than confrontational. He believed that members of a community make a social contract for the common good. Anyone who breaks this contract through greed or exploitation is considered immoral by the rest of the community. John Rawls of the 20<sup>th</sup> century agreed with the notion of a social contract and added that inequalities may only exist if they advantage the poor. In effect, those with the least must be given the most in order to build a more socially just culture (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). The ideas of these two thinkers are relevant to international development and volunteerism because of where globalization has brought us today. It could be

argued that our social contracts are no longer just written with our neighbors in close proximity, but also with people around the globe that are affected by our economic, social, and political actions. This extreme connectivity along with the wide gaps of wealth in the world today makes it so that people who have never met are nonetheless bound together. International volunteering allows for these people to meet and for the advantaged to give some of their wealth and skills to the poor.

Peter Kropotkin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century theorized that people are generous not because of the rewards they may attain, but because of natural compassion for others. He believed that humans instinctively want to help others in order to reach social harmony. Kropotkin came to these conclusions by shifting Darwin's theory of survival by competition into survival by cooperation (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). Without cooperation, how could we have evolved as a society? These ideas of self-sacrifice and empathy may seem idealistic, but they are very relevant to the feelings expressed by volunteers around the world (Dekker & Halman, 2003). The primary motivation of volunteers in any sector or location is desire to help others. While the outcomes of international volunteering may be controversial or even detrimental, the original intentions of the volunteers are resolutely good.

But the intentions of individuals are miniscule compared to the strength of superpowers. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are well known for their 19<sup>th</sup> century arguments against capitalism. At the heart of their case is the belief that capitalist economies inescapably produce inequality and poverty among the working class. In order to stop the exploitation of the poor by the minority elite, they argue that our society must evolve beyond the capitalist system, which is inherently anti-social justice (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). While volunteer tourists are not directly changing world political and economic systems, their actions are part of an organized

effort to reduce the exploitation of the poor. When designed well, volunteer programs can help historically oppressed communities reclaim power over their future through education, business, and civic organization.

Defining where and when social justice is achieved is debatable. With so many diverse cultures and populations, could there really be one universal meaning of social justice? David Miller believes that it lies in the fundamental principles of morality that are agreed upon within a society. The categories of these principles are need, consequences, and equality. Societies must determine their common standard of needs, such as education, nutrition, and safety. If everyone does not obtain these needs, then social justice has not been achieved. Second, consequences have to do with the rewards and punishments that come from people's actions. If someone works hard but does not earn the expected rewards, their effort is pointless. Finally, equality guarantees that laws provide the same rights for all people without discrimination. Miller notes that it is crucial to listen to the voices of historically marginalized groups to be sure that the laws are not biased themselves (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007).

These principles are useful for international volunteer programs because they promote the idea that every life on earth is of value. People living in a certain country, with a certain skin tone, or with certain religious beliefs are not any more or less deserving of needs, consequences, and equality than anyone else. Volunteers setting out to disadvantaged communities around the world should be dedicated to this idea so that they can be tools and advocates of social justice.

Volunteer organizations and charities attract and organize groups of people with common desires to serve others. Individuals with aspirations are important, but the joining together of passionate individuals is critical for significant impact. J. Mohan Rao says that justice and equality will be a result of collective action and that this action must be performed on an

international scale. Steve Chase says that this collective action should be cultivated in schools. He suggests that professors should teach activism and social justice in the classroom so that students can then properly identify injustice in the world and take actions to remedy it (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). These ideas are strongly connected to the concept of service learning, in which students learn by doing. Some high schools and colleges have embraced service learning as a component of the curriculum (Jorgenson, 2009). For example, an engineering course on water systems could include a spring break class trip to Bolivia to help build a community's water well. By traveling to the site, students not only get hands on practice in their field of study, but also learn about the experiences of a particular community outside of their culture. These kinds of experiences abroad may open up a student's cultural sensitivity and awareness that otherwise would have remained undeveloped.

In talking about the state of the world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vladimir Lenin described the characteristics of globalization as a modern form of imperialism, meaning that cross-cultural interactions driven by economics and profit were inherently exploitive (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). From what we have witnessed over the past century, his assessment is partially correct. However, his critique does not leave any room for positive outcomes of globalization. Global communication and travel have allowed cross-cultural interactions through programs like international volunteering to propel the social justice movement. The relationships formed by volunteers and hosts are a valuable tool for building a more equitable and cooperative society.

### **2.3.3 Human capital, social capital, and social exchange theories**

Theories of social justice hold humans to an ideal, expecting behavior that is compassionate, cooperative, and selfless. The theories of human capital, social capital, and social exchange look at human interaction in a less idealistic way and more through notions of economics and political realism. These theories offer supporting yet alternative evidence for the value of international volunteering.

Human capital is the skills and experiences that contribute to a person's social and economic worth. The most direct form of human capital is education. Social capital is related to the connections one makes with society through groups or social contacts. Perkins and Benoit use the example of volunteer firefighters to examine how volunteering contributes to human and social capital. They found that volunteer firefighters gain significant human capital through the skills they learn on the job. Their social capital is more abstract, but is apparent in the connections and relationships they make with the society. Volunteer firefighters become important identifiable members of the community, moving the group in a positive direction and sometimes even inspiring others to public service (Perkins & Benoit, 2004).

Perkins and Benoit conclude that part of the attraction of joining a volunteer fire department is the acquisition of human and social capital. This can be applied to volunteers in various sectors, including education. An American volunteer teacher in China is likely to gain teaching skills, language skills, and communication skills (human capital) as well as broad social networks and cross-cultural relationships (social capital). In a school setting, it is expected that the Chinese students would gain significant human capital from their English-speaking teacher, as well as social capital in the form of international relationships. The volunteer-host relationship presents various opportunities for both sides to acquire human and social capital, both of which

can increase individual value and social cohesion. In short, volunteering can help build a society full of skillful, productive members.

Social exchange theory is similar in outcome, in that an exchange of resources provides beneficial change to both sides. The idea behind social exchange theory is that people analyze costs and benefits of situations and relationships and then make decisions that they see best fitting their needs. From the international volunteering perspective, the two sides are the foreign volunteers and the hosts, sometimes known as the “voluntoured” (McGehee & Andereck, 2009). McGehee and Andereck’s case study in Mexico focuses on the desires and decisions made by the voluntoured. They found that those who benefit from volunteer presence want the volunteering to continue, and those who have never even had contact with volunteers also have positive impressions of them. This analysis shows that the community observed the volunteer activity, even from afar, and assessed its costs and benefits to their society. While this study did not look at the desires of the volunteers, it can be assumed from similar case studies that the volunteers wanted to help others while also learning and gaining new skills.

#### **2.3.4 Conclusion**

People considering taking a trip abroad to volunteer are not likely to study social theories pertaining to international development or charity. Nor are they likely to look at their experiences from a broad perspective steeped in the history of imperialism and social exchange. Volunteers are much more likely to internalize their experiences and use them to direct their future plans, whether it be a career in teaching or a commitment to volunteering locally. Social theories are most useful for the volunteer vacation industry and those who scrutinize it. From the choice of a service site to the recruitment of volunteers, ethics play an enormous role in the

decisions and practices of voluntourism organizations. The theories addressed here can play a significant role in monitoring the impact of volunteer programs and guiding them toward best practices.

### **3.0 RESEARCH METHODS**

This study was designed to be qualitative for many reasons. First, it is very difficult to gather the data on how many foreign volunteers have been serving in Chinese schools. There is no government or organization that keeps track of volunteers or monitors their experiences or achievements. Therefore, any quantitative data would be hard to interpret without some idea of how large the volunteer population actually is. Second, it is difficult to make conclusions and generalizations about foreign volunteers in China due to the nation's size, diversity, and lack of transparency. One volunteer's experience in Beijing, the nation's capital, looks very different from a teaching position in rural Tibet. Finally, the goal of my study is to understand relationships and perceptions, which I believe are processed best through the exact words of volunteers themselves. While their comments may not be perfectly applicable to a wide range of volunteers even in the cities where they serve, they bring up important issues that should be addressed by all people involved in the volunteer experience. The goal of this study is not to come to any conclusions about foreign volunteers in China, but rather to gather ideas and problems that arise from this particular service interaction.



### 3.1 RECRUITMENT PROCEDURE

Before recruiting participants, I composed all of the materials that the university's Institutional Review Board required: letter to sending organizations, recruitment letter, interview questions, and participant consent (see Appendixes A and B). After these documents were approved, I began recruiting participants. To find participants for my research, I first asked volunteer agencies to distribute my recruitment script to their volunteers. I started with the volunteer sending organizations mostly out of convenience; it would be very difficult to find contact information for people volunteering in China if I were not personally in China as well. Since I worked in China as an educational volunteer for the summer of 2010, I was able to use my familiarity and references with some volunteer organizations to promote my study. However, none of the participants were people that I had met or worked with in China, and our only interactions have been as researcher and participant.

I also contacted organizations who advertise teaching abroad programs online. I collected names of organizations and their contact information exclusively from the internet. I searched online with terms like "volunteer in China" and "gap year China," which provided me with 39 organizations. All of the organizations I contacted through email are listed in Table 1. These organizations generally work as third parties, connecting volunteers from abroad to schools or other service sites in China. The vast majority of these organizations are based in the United States and United Kingdom, with a few others in Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. I chose to find these organizations through web searches because that is the most commonly-used method by volunteers when searching for opportunities to volunteer overseas. Contacting the organizations through email was the most appropriate method for this study because my

recruitment letters had to be approved by the university IRB, and the organizations received only the approved text.

**Table 1.** Sending organizations for volunteers in China

1.	AmeriSpan	<a href="http://www.amerispan.com">www.amerispan.com</a>
2.	A Broader View	<a href="http://www.abroaderview.org">www.abroaderview.org</a>
3.	Asia Venture	<a href="http://www.aventure.co.uk">www.aventure.co.uk</a>
4.	Bridge Volunteers	<a href="http://www.bridgevolunteers.org">www.bridgevolunteers.org</a>
5.	CAI	<a href="http://www.cai-china.org">www.cai-china.org</a>
6.	China Study Abroad	<a href="http://www.chinastudyabroad.org">www.chinastudyabroad.org</a>
7.	CIEE	<a href="http://www.ciee.org">www.ciee.org</a>
8.	Compassion for Migrant Children	<a href="http://www.cmc-china.org">www.cmc-china.org</a>
9.	Connect 123	<a href="http://www.connect-123.com">www.connect-123.com</a>
10.	CrossCultural Solutions	<a href="http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org">www.crossculturalsolutions.org</a>
11.	EIL UK	<a href="http://www.Eiluk.org">www.Eiluk.org</a>
12.	Experiential Learning International	<a href="http://www.eliabroad.org">www.eliabroad.org</a>
13.	GeoVisions	<a href="http://www.geovisions.org">www.geovisions.org</a>
14.	Global China Connection	<a href="http://www.globalchinaconnection.com">www.globalchinaconnection.com</a>
15.	Global Volunteer Network	<a href="http://www.globalvolunteernetwork.org">www.globalvolunteernetwork.org</a>
16.	Global Volunteers	<a href="http://www.globalvolunteers.org">www.globalvolunteers.org</a>
17.	Go Eco	<a href="http://www.goeco.org">www.goeco.org</a>
18.	Green Force	<a href="http://www.greenforce.org">www.greenforce.org</a>
19.	IFRE	<a href="http://www.ifrevolunteers.org">www.ifrevolunteers.org</a>
20.	International Volunteer HQ	<a href="http://www.volunteerhq.org">www.volunteerhq.org</a>
21.	i-to-i	<a href="http://www.i-to-i.com">www.i-to-i.com</a>
22.	Keats School	<a href="http://www.keatsschool.com">www.keatsschool.com</a>
23.	New Times	<a href="http://www.teachinchina.cn">www.teachinchina.cn</a>
24.	Next Step China	<a href="http://www.nextstepchina.org">www.nextstepchina.org</a>
25.	Projects Abroad	<a href="http://www.projects-abroad.org">www.projects-abroad.org</a>
26.	Rural China Education Foundation	<a href="http://www.ruralchina.org">www.ruralchina.org</a>
27.	Rural Education Action Project	<a href="http://www.reap.stanford.edu">www.reap.stanford.edu</a>
28.	Rustic Volunteer and Travel	<a href="http://www.rustic-volunteer-travel.com">www.rustic-volunteer-travel.com</a>
29.	Save the Children China	<a href="http://www.savethechildren.org.cn">www.savethechildren.org.cn</a>
30.	Sino Volunteer	<a href="http://sinovolunteer.com">http://sinovolunteer.com</a>
31.	Smaller Earth	<a href="http://www.smallerearth.com">www.smallerearth.com</a>
32.	Sunrise Volunteer Program	<a href="http://en.sunrint.com">http://en.sunrint.com</a>
33.	The Green Lion	<a href="http://www.thegreenlion.net">www.thegreenlion.net</a>
34.	Travel to Teach	<a href="http://www.travel-to-teach.org">www.travel-to-teach.org</a>
35.	Travelers Worldwide	<a href="http://www.travellersworldwide.com">www.travellersworldwide.com</a>
36.	Volunteers in Asia	<a href="http://www.viaprograms.org">www.viaprograms.org</a>
37.	VSO	<a href="http://www.vso.org.uk">www.vso.org.uk</a>
38.	WLS International	<a href="http://www.gapyearinasia.com">www.gapyearinasia.com</a>
39.	World Teach	<a href="http://www.worldteach.org">www.worldteach.org</a>

I contacted each organization in January 2011 through email (see recruitment letter in Appendix B). If they did not respond the first time, I wrote to them a second time three weeks later. Out of the 39 organizations I wrote to, 14 responded, making my response rate from organizations at 35.9 percent. Twelve of those 14 organizations agreed to distribute my recruitment letters to their volunteers. Seven volunteers who received my recruitment letter from their volunteer organizations contacted me with interest in participating. Five of those ultimately decided to participate in the study. The two volunteers who decided not to participate were not able to commit the amount of time needed to complete the interviews. The five participants were referred to my study by three different sending organizations. From the five participants, four chose to be interviewed over email and one via Skype online voice chat. The primary reason for using these methods of interview was due to financial constraints; using these internet communication resources was free for me and the participants. All of the participants volunteered in schools with the help of an organization or hosting program, two of which were based outside of China.

### **3.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

My goal was to obtain five to 10 interviews with volunteers for my study. This form of recruitment was not easy or efficient for gaining these interviews, but I did achieve my minimum number of participants. Looking at the amount of data now, it is clear that five interviews is a substantial amount for this study and their contributions cover a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

The email interviews were structured and totaled 23 questions. I split the email interviews into three emails sent over a period of five weeks. The exact time that the participants received the emails depended on when they asked for them. For example, one volunteer wanted two weeks in between answering the first two batches of questions, while another volunteer wanted all of them as quickly as possible. The first and second email contained eight questions and the third email contained the final seven questions. I wrote to participants two or three times after the interviews with some minor follow-up questions, such as biographical information, and to check on my clarity and understanding. The Skype interview lasted one hour and covered the same 23 questions that were asked in the email interviews. I contacted this volunteer twice again after the Skype interview to obtain missing biographical information.

I collected the data for this study by transcribing interviews that had been performed either through email or Skype. All of this data was kept private in a secure, password-protected email account. Each participant was also given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. I analyzed the transcripts by categorizing their responses into topics and opinions. I then compared each of the five respondents to each other, grouping them into similar opinions and thoughts.

## **4.0 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

The following sections will explore the participant profiles, the details of our interviews, and the relevance of their responses to my research question.

### **4.1 VOLUNTEER PROFILES**

I conducted five interviews in March 2011. Four of the participants are American citizens, three of which are of Chinese heritage. Being of Chinese heritage was important to volunteers because they were sometimes mistaken as Chinese (until they started speaking) and this may have affected how the students treated them. The one non-American respondent is from Europe and does not speak English fluently. Therefore, her answers are shorter than the other participants. In addition, the one Skype interview participant did not have the same amount of time to consider her answers as did the other four. Talking on Skype is like talking on the telephone, and I did not send her my questions in advance. The respondents who chose to answer through email had more time to consider what they were typing and sending to me, which also made their email answers longer.

Four of the participants are women. The age range of all five participants is from 23 to 27 years old. The range of service of the participants ranges from two months to two years. At the time of the interviews, three of the five were still volunteering in China, while the two others had

ended their service in November 2010 but still resided in China for work. This is an important point because volunteers who are no longer serving may have different perspectives about their experiences and utility now that the position is finished. All names have been changed to preserve the privacy of participants.

Maria is a 24-year-old European who studied Chinese language and culture in college, and therefore speaks fluent Chinese. She lives in a large city in northern China, where she has volunteered in two capacities. First, she served as a teacher for migrant children specializing in mental health activities. When that position ended, she started volunteering in a communications and fund raising position for another Chinese educational non-profit, where she continues to volunteer today. Maria does not have a planned ending point for this volunteer position.

Lisa is 23 and was born in China. She was raised in the United States by her Chinese parents and has visited relatives around China. She rates her Chinese speaking ability as moderate, but she cannot read or write Chinese characters. She currently lives and works in a large city in northern China, where she found out about a volunteering opportunity to teach English to migrant students on a 6-week long program that ran on Saturday mornings. Lisa finished her volunteer project in November 2010 but continues to work professionally in China.

Joe is a 25-year-old American who first went to China to improve on his language skills. While planning his trip, he found out about a volunteering opportunity at a migrant school in northern China through a friend and decided to pursue that as well. He describes himself as half-Chinese, and he learned the language through intensive study programs and a semester at a university. He categorized his language skills at the start of his service as beginner, but his interaction with Chinese students and teachers have helped him practice and improve his Chinese. He returned to the United States after a year and a half of serving at the migrant school,

but is returning again in April 2011 to continue volunteer work at the same school for another five months.

Katie is a 25-year-old American currently serving in a college in large city in southern China. She is near the end of a two-year commitment to a junior college for students with physical disabilities, where she teaches English and leads some student groups. Her location in China puts her in a Cantonese-speaking community, a language that she had not previously studied. Her basic familiarity with Mandarin, the more commonly spoken language in the rest of the country, pushed her to continue her Mandarin study. While not yet fluent, she feels comfortable with conversations and reading in Mandarin Chinese.

Stacy is a 27-year-old Asian-American who moved to a large city in northern China for work. She describes her Chinese language ability as high-intermediate, in that she can hold conversations but has difficulty reading. She worked as a volunteer art teacher for migrant students for six weeks, ending her service in November 2010 when the program finished.

**Table 2.** Study participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Asian heritage</b>	<b>Currently serving</b>	<b>Length of service</b>	<b>Interview format</b>
<b>Joe</b>	25	Yes	Yes	1 year, 11 months	Email
<b>Katie</b>	25	No	Yes	2 years	Email
<b>Lisa</b>	23	Yes	No	2 months	Email
<b>Maria</b>	24	No	Yes	7 months	Email
<b>Stacy</b>	27	Yes	No	2 months	Skype

#### **4.1.1 Limits of population**

With a small, interview-based study, there are always limitations to the data. Originally I had wanted to get a more diverse geographic impression of China, including rural areas and small

villages. However, four of the participants in this study lived in very large cities (which by Chinese standards means more than 10 million people) and only one volunteer worked in the outskirts of a large city. In addition, four of the five participants served in northern China. All five served in areas along the coast, leaving out major central and western regions of the vast country.

In addition, most of the sample population was American. This was not intentional, as many of the organizations I contacted for recruitment were based in the United Kingdom. However, interpreting data from Americans in their 20s is likely easier for me because that is my demographic as well. The American experience abroad is often complex since people around the world are familiar with the United States, its politics, its products, and its media. Being a young American who has also volunteered in China, I was able to relate to the participants who debated the benefits and drawbacks to being an American serving in China.

Finally, the five volunteers profiled in this study are unique in that they have made long-term commitments to China, either by studying the language or living there for long periods of time. Absent from this study are the extremely short-term volunteers, the gap year youth who hop across the world or only serve for a few weeks or days. Their perspectives are likely much different than those I collected.

#### **4.1.2 Suggestions for future data collection**

For future researchers looking to improve on the data, it would be better to form a relationship early with a particular sending organization that can provide a diverse range of participants, for example one that sends volunteers to both rural and urban areas. By first sending out letters to sending organizations in January and beginning interviews one to two months later, I may have



had too tight of a schedule to build relationships with sending organizations who would have been more willing to help me. The sending organizations that eventually decided to work with me may have trusted me more than other organizations because they recognized me from my work in China on migrant education.

It may also be interesting to get a wider range of nationalities involved in an interview-based study like this. Whether English-speaking or not, volunteers from the perceived “Western” countries play an interesting role in Chinese society. Different kinds of English accents, such as Irish, Scottish, and Australian, may also cause different reactions among students, parents, and teachers in English language classrooms. It has been argued that the American accent is the most desirable in China today.

Finally, the most in-depth data comes from personal interactions with the participants at their volunteer sites. As a foreign researcher, it would not have been easy for me to obtain permission from Chinese schools to observe or interact with the students and teachers, but with more time it would have been possible on a small scale. For a researcher with more time and a budget allowing for travel to China, this would be the ideal setting for learning about the relationships between volunteers and hosts.

## **4.2 QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS**

I asked the participants 23 questions relating to their volunteer experiences (for questions see Appendix B). I layered the questions in a way that would be conversational yet thought-provoking, so that respondents could not merely answer yes or no. I grouped my interview questions into three categories: motivation, relationships, and social justice. Questions dealing

with motivation looked at reasons why volunteers chose to go to China and what their goals were for their service. The purpose of these questions is to see how much of the motivation is personal and how much is altruistic. Research has suggested that most volunteers benefit from their service in their overall level of personal happiness and/or human capital (Butcher, 2003; Howes, 2008; Hudson & Inkson, 2006; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Stebbins & Graham, 2004; Suh, 2009). Enjoyment and adventure are particularly important motivations in overseas volunteering because the volunteers have a clear desire to go abroad. If volunteers did not enjoy travel or the experience of being an outsider, they would likely have remained in their own country to volunteer. The sacrifices one makes as a volunteer suggests that it is not all about the personal rewards and that they must also have a selfless desire to help others. Participants in my study have shown both elements of motivation: a desire to live in China while also helping those in need.

Questions about relationships aimed to grasp if the volunteers created sustainable or dependent connections with their volunteer sites. Sustainable relationships would be characterized by the desire for the program to go on even after foreigners depart or another long-term plan with a similar goal of local autonomy. Dependent volunteer relationships are those where the local people are merely recipients of aid, without any participation or say over the organization or future of the programming. This is a hard concept to measure without the input from the students or local stakeholders. However, the participants in my study have noted that local participation in volunteering seems to be increasing and that dependence on foreign help may be decreasing. They consider this a positive adjustment that would keep the future of Chinese education and development directly in the hands of local people without the need for outsiders.

The section on relationships also looks at how being a volunteer teacher is also a form of service learning, as the teachers are learning a lot as well. As foreigners, this volunteer position is a chance for the participants to learn about Chinese culture and education. It also shows them what it would be like to be a teacher, a career that some volunteers are considering. This concept of mutual learning is important because my speculation is that international service is more about the learning than it is about the actual service project. The stated goal may be to teach migrant children English, but the most tangible result is cross-cultural learning between teacher and student, as evidenced in their interview responses. The benefits of intercultural learning and understanding may in fact outweigh measurable service projects.

The final section includes questions pertaining to social justice. The underlying goal in this study is to understand how volunteers impact global inequity, since that is the long-term objective of service. International service is social justice in action. Service of any kind, domestic or abroad, promotes the idea that the more fortunate should help the less fortunate, which is an idea not based in statutory law but in personal codes of morality and fairness. I did not directly ask about the concepts of social justice or international development because I did not want to plant those terms in the interviewees' minds'. Instead, I asked questions about what it is like to be a volunteer who obviously comes from another country. Questions about why I am here and what I am doing provoked participants to reflect on the interactions between privileged foreigners and local Chinese students and what they ultimately see as the role for foreign volunteers in Chinese schools.

### 4.2.1 Identity

Reflecting on one's self and work is important when evaluating a volunteer experience. I asked participants three questions about identity: What is volunteering? Do you consider yourself a teacher? Do you consider yourself a tourist? The answers provide an interesting look at how connected or disconnected volunteers feel to their work and host communities.

Three of five respondents said that volunteering meant you did not get paid for your work. This is a fairly universal concept that was explored earlier in Chapter 2, which looked at the different concepts of volunteering around the world. However, among these volunteers, one actually receives a stipend for her work which covers living expenses, similar to the amount of money a local Chinese teacher would receive in salary. Katie sees it as an “uncomfortable contradiction” that she is referred to as a volunteer by the organization and peers, but does not call herself a volunteer. “The argument I usually hear in defense of the word 'volunteer' for what I do is that, as an American with a college degree, my potential earning power is much higher than what I'm making now in China.”

Joe and Maria described volunteering as a more reciprocal exchange than the other respondents, not mentioning the lack of payment. Maria said that volunteering was a way for her to feel useful, which indicates the benefits that she receives in return. Joe took this concept even further by saying:

I rarely use the word volunteering, preferring to think of service as a reciprocal rather than a one-way relationship. In any meaningful service relationship, both people learn an incredible amount and it's important for both the 'volunteer' and the beneficiary to recognize each other for that.

Whether or not these volunteers felt like teachers mainly depended on if they enjoyed teaching and if they had previous teaching experience. The five responses ranged to not feeling like a teacher at all to feeling like one very much. Stacy felt like a teacher a little bit when she taught art to migrant students. Joe said that he felt like a teacher because he had worked for two years in educational programs back home. Katie also felt like a teacher, but reluctantly, because for her, teaching is stressful more than fun. Maria said she did not feel like a teacher at all, even though she taught in a migrant school. Lisa was not sure if she was a teacher, but she expressed doubt that her level of Chinese language and lack of teaching skills made her qualified.

“I wonder if I have any idea what I'm doing.... I really think my students and their parents must be delusional thinking I have the ability to help change their lives....Anyone with a native English accent is considered an English teacher.” *Lisa*

“I do call myself a teacher even though I'm not sure I really like it very much (I find it more stressful than enjoyable) and I don't plan to teach like this as a career.” *Katie*

None of the volunteers identified as tourists, either because they had moved to China for work or they just lived there long enough for it to feel like home.

“Tourists don't work. They don't spend months or years in one place.” *Katie*

“I still haven't done anything touristy aside from visiting the Great Wall. There just wasn't time.” *Joe*

However, three of the volunteers noted that they still felt like foreigners in China. The language difference or a non-Chinese face makes it easy to identify them as outsiders, which then causes Chinese people to treat them a bit differently.

#### **4.2.2 Motivations and goals**

I asked the volunteers what their goals were in their service positions. All five of them answered with reasons relating to helping children, from empowering students, to giving them confidence, to helping them achieve their dreams. This is an important question for all volunteer endeavors. Volunteers, especially foreign volunteers in overseas experiences, have been criticized for serving out of self-interest. The volunteers in my study never mentioned personal gain, but only the well-being of the children they served.

“The objective of my work is not money or things, but happiness of children.” *Maria*

“My goals were to make a lasting and valuable impression on my students and instill the love of learning in them all.” *Lisa*

Some of their goals had wider social aims as well. Katie described her school as a vocational college for students with physical disabilities. She expressed her frustration that these students are cut off from the mainstream schools, making the students isolated from general Chinese society. “On a larger scale, my goal is to make my position here obsolete. I hope that one day soon this school will not need to exist as it does, and will not need a 'volunteer' as such.”

### 4.2.3 What does volunteering look like?

Each of the five participants in this study served in a different type of capacity, but all within the umbrella of education. Four of the five volunteers worked with migrant students. This was not a coincidence. Since I have experience working with migrant students in China as well, organizations that work with volunteers in migrant schools were more likely to help me with my study. The fifth volunteer worked with students with disabilities, making all five of the participants in this study involved with populations of China that have been “left behind” by mainstream education.

All of the participants served as teachers. Three volunteers indicated that teaching English was a main component of their service in China. This is a very common placement for Americans in overseas volunteering positions. Maria, not being a native English speaker, was not given this task, and instead worked with children on mental health activities. Stacy was assigned to be an art teacher with her intermediate level of spoken Chinese. However, she found that her language ability was not good enough to teach art, a subject in which she was also not a trained expert. Language became the biggest obstacle to Stacy feeling like an effective volunteer:

I was kind of annoyed with myself because I couldn't understand the questions from the kids.... Sometimes I felt really useless because I couldn't engage with the kids directly. I felt like a burden on the other teachers.... I think the job was much better done by the fluent Chinese speakers.

If one goal of volunteering is to connect with students, language becomes a crucial element for that to be achieved. For most volunteer positions, especially in China, language ability is not a requirement. Some English teachers are even encouraged never to speak the language of the students so that their classrooms are true English language immersions.

However, that arrangement suggests that the goal of service is not to make a connection between two groups, but instead is to merely fill in a gap where a job needs to be done, in this case that of an English teacher.

#### **4.2.4 Learning about others**

I asked a series of questions that aimed to collect the ways that volunteers learned during their service. My assumption before the interviews was that learning is a crucial part of volunteering, and without being open as a learner, a volunteer will not make a positive impact on those served. A learning attitude is important in measuring what a community and a student's need is, as well as for connecting with the served.

All of the volunteers in this study had a strong connection to China, either by family heritage, language study, or interest in the history and culture. Choosing China as a service destination was not an accident. Katie had previously studied in Beijing during college. “I thought about volunteering in Vietnam or Indonesia, but I decided I'd be more effective working in a place I already knew a little about: China.” Maria chose China because of her fluency in the language and love of the culture. Joe wanted to work on his Chinese language skills. Coming from Chinese ethnicity, Lisa saw education as an important value in Chinese culture:

Education is probably the most important thing to Chinese people.... the Chinese would prefer to have a valuable education than receive free money or handouts for the rest of their lives. I figured one of the best ways to contribute to the Chinese society was not by giving stuff, but giving education.

When I asked them what the most significant thing they learned as volunteers was, their answers varied from practical to philosophical. Stacy expressed how much she learned about the



migrant populations of China, a huge group of people who live a difficult life side-by-side the more wealthy Chinese, but who are often pushed aside and forgotten about. Learning about the struggles of migrant students make volunteers like Stacy more eager to learn and help even more.

Joe also indicated how much he has learned about Chinese migrant issues and the potential that the young adults he worked with exemplified. Working with high school students who desired to attend top universities, Joe saw:

...the exact kind of people that the world needs to solve the problems of the future. If there's a way to get these kids the educational opportunities that can give them the tools they need to affect positive social change, they will repay it hundreds of times over.

In talking and working with these Chinese students, he learned how much he had previously underestimated the value of a good education.

Joe also learned a very practical cross-cultural lesson: problem solving methods vary across cultures and around the world. In working with Chinese colleagues and students, he found that combining American and Chinese skills and approaches produced new, creative results. Katie gained practical teaching methods as well. Being placed in a teaching position with little knowledge about teaching, especially in a Chinese setting, she learned quickly what was effective and what made her classroom flow.

Maria and Lisa both answered this question of what they learned with similar philosophical perspectives: the little things in life are important. Maria was reminded of this by interactions with her students. Lisa initially went into the volunteer teaching position thinking that these underprivileged students would be poor and unhappy. But her observations tell a different story:

They taught me that a happy and fulfilling life didn't have to include the privileges that I and others had—a college education, middle-class lifestyle, the opportunities to become big and successful in the world.... These kids taught me that this isn't the only image of a wonderful life, and there's a lot of it left to choice, perspective, or a bit of both.... I think most of the teachers felt this way.... We were afraid for these kids and what they must go through.... But the kids were having a good time, there was obvious joy and contentment there that I don't see in many middle-class college-educated adults that I know.

Her comments show that she did not only learn about the realities of life for migrant children, but also gained perspective on her own cultural and social background. By spending time with children often labeled as underprivileged, Lisa changed her ideas on what underprivileged actually means, a lesson that goes well beyond China, the classroom, and a group of migrant children.

#### **4.2.5 Learning about China and education**

Since all five participants in this research had a connection to China either through heritage or college study, each of them arrived in the country with opinions about what China and education in China was like. Three of the respondents wrote extensively about their views on Chinese politics and society. As Americans, each of them recognized the bias that most Americans believe in: a China run by an abusive central government filled with a billion people who have no freedom, but at the same time full of booming economic growth. Living and volunteering in China has only complicated this view for Joe, Katie, and Lisa.

“While previously I was quick to dismiss any non-democratic government as not good, I think my main take-away from China has been that a functioning state regardless of its form of government is infinitely better than a non-functioning one.... The government's role in China is much more nuanced and complex than I had originally thought.” *Joe*

“I have more empathy for Chinese politics and policies than before.... Also, since I know my students and other young people here pretty well, and they are great people with new ideas, I have hope for the future of this country.” *Katie*

“The ideas I had about Chinese people were flipped inside out.... Chinese people are just like anyone else, and they know the reality they live in. They're very aware of what the Chinese media is and isn't, what ridiculous things the government does that it tries to cover up, of how the injustice in their society works and how only the rich really win.”

*Lisa*

From just these excerpts it is clear that these three volunteers have thought very deeply about the place where they have chosen to volunteer. They also each indicate a change in thought or feeling about Chinese politics or people. Spending time in China and getting to know students or colleagues gave these volunteers a chance to learn about different perspectives and ways of life. Without the experience of living in China, it is unlikely that they would have learned so much about the complexity of modern China.

Maria said that volunteering in China has only made her love China more. Stacy expressed how working with migrant children taught her how important migration issues are in

China, and without this first-hand experience she would have not understood the gravity of the situation. Stacy also explained how her view of Chinese college students changed as a result of team teaching with them. Before, she had thought about them through the stereotype of being all about academics. In reality, these college students desired experiences outside of their university classrooms and wanted to give back to their communities.

When asked how their ideas on teaching and education have changed from their volunteering experience, the five respondents each answered differently. In a practical way, Joe said that teaching English helped him understand the needs of English language learners and methods of teaching them English. Maria indicated that the new teaching experience has opened up possibilities for her personally, as she has learned more skills.

Stacy, Katie, and Lisa talked about their teaching experiences on a broader level.

“I have a lot more respect for what teachers have to do.... It's really hard! The people who run these migrant schools are up against the government who doesn't want them there.... I have a lot of respect for people who are trying to provide service to migrants.” *Stacy*

“Before, while I knew that education was important, I didn't really feel it. Now, it seems that my view of education is that it is ... the best possible tool we as a society have for improving ourselves. When I see a problem, it's one of the first things that comes to mind in terms of a solution.” *Katie*

“I've always believed teaching is better done through friendship rather than an unbalanced relationship, and the volunteer experience allowed me to reaffirm that.” *Lisa*

These volunteers indicate different areas of learning about education: the hard work that goes into teaching especially with migrant children, the importance of education in a society's development, and the personal connections between teachers and students. Without their volunteer experiences, these thoughts and lessons would not have come to them as strongly.

#### **4.2.6 Relationships and reciprocity**

There are positive and negative elements to every relationship. I asked participants five questions dealing with relationships at their volunteer sites, including with students, colleagues, and the general community. Their reflections show that while there are challenges to every relationship, positive outcomes are the norm.

Positive feelings outnumber negative feelings for all of the volunteers interviewed. Stacy said that getting involved in the community where she has lived for the past two years was the most enjoyable aspect of her volunteer position. The other four participants talked specifically about their enjoyment with the children they worked with. Joe, who is soon returning for a second time to his volunteer site in China, said how much he looks forward to seeing his students again. Katie, who works with college students, considers them her friends. Lisa said that she felt like a big sister to the young migrant students that she taught. Maria described her relationship with the migrant children as “fantastic.” The comments from all of these volunteers show that their service was much more than doing a job for free. Volunteering created close relationships between volunteers and students.

“The best part of my experience hands down was building relationships with my students.... I'm so excited to go back and see them. They keep in touch pretty well while I'm away, but I can't wait to get more details when I get back.” *Joe*

“They are amazing, and I love every minute of our time together. They inspire me to work harder for them.” *Katie*

“I really wish I had more time to spend with them; every early Saturday morning was worth it.” *Lisa*

Relationships with the local teachers and school professionals were also positive as reported by all five volunteers. Working with Chinese teachers and professionals is a cross-cultural experience for these foreign volunteers, and both sides seem to have gained from this relationship.

“We had a friendly and cooperative relationship.... I had taught middle school children for a summer program and had some teaching advice to give.” *Lisa*

“I'm slowly realizing more and more how much more important relationships with teachers/coworkers are than just having common goals.... I'm looking forward to spending more time just 'hanging out' with the teachers instead of always being on a mission.” *Joe*

“The other [Chinese] volunteers were able to gain trust and help the students. They were able to give constructive guidance.” *Stacy*

Positive relationships are connected to actions and feelings of reciprocity, whether it is between foreign volunteers and local volunteers, or volunteers and students. By giving their time and energy, volunteers were also receiving something from the interaction.

“In any service experience it's important to be open to learning more than you could ever contribute; my students definitely made this true for me.” *Joe*

“My work is not needed, but I love to do it for China. That country gave me a lot.” *Maria*

“The service work may not have a miraculous impact on the people you're trying to help, but at least it's getting volunteers to stop being engrossed in their own lives and do something about a problem.” *Lisa*

#### **4.2.7 Challenges to foreign volunteers**

While the overall comments were positive, volunteer experiences in China are not without drawbacks and obstacles. All five respondents were able to identify areas of difficulty; the four volunteers who do not speak fluent Mandarin Chinese stressed the limitations of the language barrier.

“For not having strong language skills, I felt kind of useless.” *Stacy*

“Even though my Chinese is getting pretty decent and the kids love teaching me, it's much harder to interact with colleagues. Especially in such a relationship-driven culture, this is paramount. I'm not sure how anyone can even consider doing service in China without learning a fair amount of Chinese first.” *Joe*

“It wasn't until I visited the home of one of my students for Spring Festival last year that I realized how terrible it was that I couldn't communicate. I felt that not only was I rude, I missed out on the opportunity to make so many friendships.” *Katie*

“The language barrier made it difficult for me to be an effective teacher, and usually I'd refer to a Chinese teacher to handle something.” *Lisa*

Language was not the only challenge for foreign volunteers. Lisa was frustrated by some of the “unrealistic expectations” that parents and school officials had for the volunteer program. “Lots of parents want their children's English to improve through the program, or feel that the program isn't producing any hard, substantial results to prove that it's worth the time and effort for the students to attend.” Since her educational program was on Saturdays, it took extra effort for the families to send their children to the school. She also noticed that some of their weekend programs were not welcome in schools because there were not teachers or school officials there on Saturdays to ensure the safety of the children.

Lisa also struggled with some of her own expectations being unrealistic and the doubt that her service actually made a difference:



My golden ideas of giving back education to the community and helping the underprivileged succeed in their lives was pretty much dashed. What could we possibly do in 18 hours to give these kids a better chance at life? That was a hard reality to swallow.

Stacy and Maria were also unsure of their impact.

“I do not think my service can really change something, but at least I can try to alleviate the pain of someone else and also understand the real needs of people.” *Maria*

“I wasn't sure that my impact was strong.... Direct connection depended on language.”

*Stacy*

The most difficult part of volunteering for Katie was the mission of the school and their expectation of her to promote it. “I don't see my students as 'disabled' in the way Chinese society and even they see themselves as disabled. There are good things about what my school does.... But that such a program is necessary is a bit disheartening.” Students attend the school for free, but she believes that students would benefit more from scholarships to attend mainstream schools. Another part of her job was to edit materials and publicize the school's services, which she disliked. “I am uncomfortable promoting the school to the larger community in the way I know I am expected to.”

#### **4.2.8 Impacts on social justice**

There is no measurement of social justice or any indicator that conditions are becoming more socially just in a community. Social justice can move forward in many ways, such as when a volunteer learns something about the world and decides to personally change their thoughts or behavior. It could also be achieved by changing the way a society treats a group of people or a problem. In the case of education, each of these volunteers saw a need to help young people in China achieve more than they were destined for. The fact that they volunteered at all shows that they already believed that inequity existed in the Chinese school system and that people like them can make a difference in children's lives.

The final seven questions in my interviews were written to determine whether or not learning about their given school population and experiencing reciprocal exchange impacted their sense of social justice internally as well as their future actions externally. It is clear from the interviews that all five volunteers were impacted strongly by their experiences, yet in different ways.

The most tangible measure of how volunteering in China will influence their actions is through asking how the service project will impact their future careers. Each of the participants indicated interest in working for the public good. Stacy, frustrated with the language barrier, explained how she had earlier considered doing development work in China, but now that she has experienced that on a smaller level, she is reconsidering. She believes that without speaking the language, it is hard to make a significant impact. But she remains passionate about helping migrant students in China and sees herself donating money or another type of service to that cause. She thinks volunteering outside of the classroom, but still working on educational

projects, could also be a useful place for her. Stacy also is even more driven to get involved in volunteering when she returns to the United States—speaking English.

Joe can already see the positive impacts in his life from volunteering at a migrant school. He has learned how to be a better teacher, how to work with English language learners, and about the “many challenges of running a non-profit organization” in China. He plans to combine these experiences with an upcoming Master's degree in public policy.

Katie has also made plans to earn a Master's degree, but in public health. This decision was strongly impacted by her two-year volunteer position in China. She had previously wanted to enter the medical field but was not sure how to narrow that down. She now imagines herself as a pediatrician because she enjoys working with young people, something she had not considered as seriously before volunteering. “Even though I don't want to be a teacher, I know that I'll be involved with education in some way, perhaps in research or advocacy.”

Maria continues to work as a volunteer communication officer for a migrant student program in China. She wants to eventually work in the development field, and this kind of volunteer experience is very useful for that career path.

Lisa is not sure how her volunteer experience will impact her future specifically. She has the desire to volunteer when she returns to the United States. While unsure about her own future, it is clear that Lisa has learned a lot about the politics of international volunteering and the complications that arise in a country like China. “China needs more volunteers.... If you can handle the frustration, and don't care if there are significant results from your work, and are here for the experience and to make connections, then China is a great place to volunteer.”

When asked if more Americans should be encouraged to volunteer in China, she was hesitant to agree:

I think we have this tendency as Americans to believe that we're missionaries who have the knowledge and power to save the world. That kind of thinking can be more harmful than useful to the people you're trying to 'help'.... If Westerners come to China to do volunteer work, I'd be concerned if they think they're coming to China to clean up its mess and 'fix China.' They can't fix China, and if they tried the Chinese wouldn't like it.

This is an important perspective that was repeated by other participants. It is hard to help improve conditions in China without first learning the needs of China. Even then, the face or voice of a foreigner may not be the best leader in social change. Stacy noted that foreigners coming to China to volunteer bring different agendas. "I think it depends on the intentions and the local needs. It's a tricky field because if they are coming from the right place, then it would be great." From earlier research as well as this study, it is clear that the right place would be more of a learning-service attitude, while the wrong place would be a "fixing" attitude.

A learning-service attitude toward China is similar to what Joe described. He thinks that Americans should be encouraged to volunteer in China so that they can learn more about its complexity, diversity, and wealth gap. He learned that China includes much more than giant cities in the middle of an economic boom; the majority of its residents lives in rural areas and is dependent on government projects to bring development and technology to their towns. In his service position, he learned about Chinese problem-solving approaches, and in return he shared some of his own techniques. Finally, he learned the most from the students that he worked closely with in the migrant high school. "Their stories about the value of their community of classmates, the sacrifices their families made for them to even finish high school, and the lessons learned from struggle deeply affected me." With an attitude more geared toward learning than fixing, Joe has contributed while at the same time benefitting from his service experience.

Katie believes that cross-cultural learning does not have to be done through a volunteer role.

I'm not at all sure that China needs or wants my service.... There's a place for Westerners here, but I don't think it is necessarily as volunteers.... Maybe we could talk about encouraging more Westerners to come to China to work or travel. That could be good because it would facilitate more exchange. It would teach the Westerners that China is not what they imagined.

She said that Chinese people could probably fill her role, either with jobs or through volunteer positions. This idea is explored further in the conclusion (Chapter 5).

The country where volunteers come from matters greatly, as Lisa explained in her comments about Americans feeling like missionaries “saving” the people abroad. I asked the volunteers if they felt like ambassadors of their countries and if their nationality was important to the students and teachers they worked with. While it may be an important issue generally for foreigners' involvement in development abroad, it did not feel personally important to everyone.

“I'm Asian-American, so I think they were confused. My Chinese is not that great so I look dumb. They didn't strongly identify me as American.” *Stacy*

“I bring with me my culture but I usually approach other cultures without underlining my nationality.” *Maria*

“I'm Chinese-American, so I get the in-between status of being Chinese but American. I think most Chinese people accept me as one of them.” *Lisa*

Others found it very important, either for their job performance or for reasons of intercultural relations.

“Critically important. Being American comes bundled with inherent differences in power, privilege, and opportunities. Not being aware of this before entering a service context is a huge mistake.” *Joe*

“Being foreign (being American is an added bonus to that, I guess) is critical to my job as the resident foreign teacher.... The idea is that by having a foreign teacher the students will be exposed to native pronunciation and feel more urgency to develop their communication skills.” *Katie*

It is clear that identity is important to each of the participants in this study, whether their job is based on their English skills or their development skills. Identity is related to global social justice when looking at the interaction between the two parties, in this case, China's needs and foreigners' actions. The actions of the foreign volunteers are always interpreted by locals as “foreign” while the needs and routines witnessed by the foreign volunteers are characterized as “Chinese.” Being aware of these perspectives and potential stereotypes and assumptions that they carry can help both sides be more open and understanding in the volunteer-recipient relationship. Sustaining a learning attitude on both sides, as opposed to clear-cut giving and receiving roles, contributes to openness and understanding in volunteer settings.



**Figure 1.** Elements contributing to international volunteering as social justice

The figure above (Figure 1) summarizes the elements that the participating volunteers identified as contributing to positive change in Chinese schools, which I have defined as social justice. First, all of the volunteers demonstrated that they learned something deeper about education in China, whether it was the difficulty of migrant children or the stigma of being categorized as disabled. Learning through first-hand experience and personal connections makes an internal change in volunteers. For some, this internal change will affect their career choices. For others, it has made them more aware of the importance of a quality education. No matter how their thoughts and feelings have changed on the topic, this change is important as it affects their concepts of justice and equality.

Internal changes in thoughts and feelings lead to change in external action. By continuing to volunteer, donating money or goods to schools, or dedicating one's life to bettering education, these volunteers have been influenced to visibly contribute to social justice through education.

The remaining two elements contributing to social justice—local voices and outside help—are specific to the international volunteering context. Working toward social change, such as improving conditions for students in China, is fundamentally a local issue. Without local support by parents, teachers, and other community members, change will not occur. The introduction of foreign volunteers is not essential to local social change, but as the participants in this study explain, it may bring benefits. Outsiders may pass along their own creative ideas and solutions that enhance local knowledge. Inviting volunteers with specific skills, such as English language teaching, art or music skills, and non-profit management, fills in gaps where communities may need extra help. The combination of local knowledge and the help of outsiders with a different perspective can produce innovative progress toward social justice.



## 5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This is the only research that specifically looks at foreign, volunteer teachers in China. Other studies and papers have only focused on a smaller combination of these factors. Therefore, the conclusions made from my study are a useful base for beginning to understand the complex trend of international volunteering and the kinds of relationships they produce. This study looks at the reflections of volunteers over the short-term; a long term or follow-up study would provide further insights into outcomes of international volunteering. This study also only takes into account the perspectives of the foreign volunteers. Broader research that includes local and student perspectives would add greatly to this subject area.

China serves as a provocative setting for this study because of its rapidly changing social, educational, and economic situation. While the direct impact of foreign volunteers in Chinese schools may not be measurable, the experiences of these volunteers are worth cataloguing and remembering. In the future there may not be as strong of a desire among young foreigners to volunteer in China, but there will no doubt be other countries in line facing similar educational and developmental challenges. While context is important, many of the feelings and thoughts from these volunteers in China will be applicable to service settings around the world.

## 5.1 FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING IN CHINA

Teaching advanced or conversational English may be best conducted by native or near-native English speakers. However, there are many other volunteer positions that may be successfully filled by locals looking to give back to their communities. Multiple volunteers in this study talked about more Chinese volunteers getting involved at their sites. Volunteerism is not a new concept in China, but in the past it has mostly been within the confines of the Communist Party. Community service in China still conjures up historical images of Mao's "re-education" of urban students. In 1958, all students became required to do physical labor for two to four weeks per year. During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, Mao went as far as to send students away from their classrooms altogether to work on farms, with the goal of "elevating the social status of farmers and ordinary workers" (Xu, 2010, p. 238). While that extreme form of public service ended with Mao's death, community service has remained closely connected to the Communist Party.

Rolandsen (2008) interviewed college-age volunteers in Quanzhou, China, to learn about the motivations and experiences of young volunteers. The volunteers worked through an organization called China Youth Volunteers' Association, which is connected to the Communist Party. But instead of passing out Party literature or fundraising, these volunteers worked as tutors and caregivers for the elderly. This kind of service is a shift from tradition in many ways. First, the students are giving their time freely as opposed to being coerced. Second, volunteers benefit personally by learning skills and developing self-identity and relationships. Finally, they are helping people in the greater community. Traditionally, Chinese children are taught to be extremely devoted to their parents. Some volunteers in Rolandsen's study said that their parents disapprove of their volunteer activities because it takes them away from helping their own family

members. This shows that volunteering is not always an easy choice for Chinese youth, making it an even more admirable act (Rolandsen, 2008). This is an interesting trend that deserves much more study, particularly looking at Chinese volunteering outside of the Communist Party completely, such as the Chinese youth who volunteer in migrant or rural schools.

A growing number of Chinese volunteers would likely change many elements of Chinese society. People volunteering in their own country or region build local solidarity (Moore McBride & Daftary, 2005). In the case of China, this would mean wealthy youth contributing to development in low-income, rural areas, making positive change on the income gap in their nation. Volunteering also contributes to civil society in China. Civil society is the public realm that includes civic participation, through involvement in activities like charity groups, associations, unions, coalitions, and faith-based organizations. A society is generally made of three elements: the government, the market, and the civil society. Participating in civil society is restricted in China, as memberships and allegiances to associations outside of the Communist Party may be looked on with suspicion by the government.

However, modern media have challenged this restriction, especially with the expansion of the internet. As scholar Guobin Yang explains, the internet has been the most powerful “virtual space” for Chinese citizens to gather and discuss public issues (Yang, 2008). The government does still retain firm control over the internet, broadcast, and print media. But Yang explains that the government has allowed more civil society participation recently, particularly after the national tragedy of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. “The massive earthquake that hit China shook more than buildings. It loosened many of the restrictions that stood in the path of an emerging civil society. Disaster allowed citizens to join in a nationwide effort to comfort victims” (2008, p. 39).

Within minutes after the earthquake, Yang explains, news media were reporting on the damage. Within hours, Chinese citizens began fundraising for the victims. In an immense act of charity and coordination, volunteers and civic groups took immediate action to donate money, give blood, and assist in the recovery effort. This example of civil society action is particularly relevant in the discussion of domestic volunteering. In a moment of desperate need, Chinese people did not hesitate to come forward to help. Yang believes that this kind of public reaction, combined with the fact that the government allowed so much civil organization, foretells a future of more civil society. As volunteering also increases through NGOs and charities as opposed to the Communist Party, civil society is gradually emerging in China.

Studies on volunteering rates have also shown that democratic governments may be related to high levels of volunteerism. The oldest democracies in the world have the highest rates of volunteering (Halman, 2003). It is a stretch to say that growing numbers of young Chinese volunteers would change the government system. However, grassroots movements like volunteer projects may place a greater importance on the individual. The power to choose a cause and volunteer to directly affect it may be related to the desire to also impact government. This would be another interesting area of study. With China's unique system of communist government with capitalist economics, it is hard to predict how it will evolve over the next generation.

Growing numbers of local volunteers is not without complications. Chinese volunteers serving in their own country are not immune to the challenges of change and cultural difference. In two studies looking at wealthy Chinese college students volunteering in poor communities in western China, researchers found that volunteers felt like outsiders in their own country. They were unable to communicate fully due to people speaking local languages and dialects (Z. Li, 2008). Some also felt unwelcome, even being told by host communities that they were taking

away local jobs (Qiao & A'rong, 2008). Both authors determine that sending volunteers to western China was not a long-term solution to improving rural schools.

This conclusion points to the underlying fact that is true for nearly all volunteers: they are filling in gaps left behind by someone else. Volunteers working in schools are essentially free teachers. Currently there is a great need for volunteers to fill in these gaps in Chinese society. The question is: who will these volunteers be? Who should they be?

## **5.2 LOCAL AND FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS IN CHINA**

Participants in this study put forth their own ideas about Chinese attitudes toward volunteering, the role of foreigners, and the future of service in China. As discussed above, voluntarily serving in China is a relatively new trend, influenced by Hong Kong and the United States (Rolandsen, 2008). But that does not mean that it is popular among all Chinese people. As Lisa explained, “Volunteering is not something Chinese people considered essential to their future.... There is a general sentiment against volunteering here. Some of my Chinese coworkers thought I was a bit strange for volunteering.” Both Lisa and Katie, though, believe that having more Chinese volunteers—as opposed to more foreigners—would be good for China:

“I think it will be soon getting to a place where it will be willing and able to take better care of its own issues.... China already has many well educated and motivated people. I am optimistic.... China sends volunteers from its own universities to needy areas.... China sends volunteers to Africa. It's all relative, I guess. I think China can fill the needs

currently filled by most volunteers itself. Maybe it would be better that way. Maybe that would help provide a few more decent jobs to the many qualified Chinese people.” *Katie*

“Volunteer work is a relatively new concept in China and many Chinese aren't participating in it. I feel that if they did volunteer, they'd find that the experience would be so rewarding and fulfilling, and maybe that would help China be a better place.” *Lisa*

Having more local volunteers, such as Chinese college students, could affect Chinese society in numerous ways. Volunteers would gain skills, learn about inequality and injustice in their community, and feel good about giving back to their country. Service learning, whether it is part of the college curriculum or not, is a great way for students to learn outside of the classroom. If these volunteers work as teachers in underprivileged schools, for example, the young students could meet middle-class college students who they may not have otherwise interacted with. These relationships may have lasting effects on the children, from increased knowledge in the classroom to a wider understanding of the options that are available to Chinese youth.

Bringing foreign volunteers into the scene can both improve and complicate the relationships and outcomes for students. At the most basic level, it is important to determine the best role for foreign volunteers in China. Since most foreigners coming to China speak native or high levels of English, they are often placed in English teaching positions. “Unfortunately various programs such as mine promote this process of 'hiring' unskilled young people to teach English abroad,” *Katie* explained. Most of these English speakers have never learned teaching methods and have never taught anything before, much less taught how to speak a language

(Snow, 1996). Add that inexperience to working in a large classroom in an unfamiliar culture, and teaching English in China starts to appear extremely challenging.

Nonetheless, the demand for high levels of English, and therefore more English teachers, is only rising across China. It is unrealistic to think that foreigners with English skills will not be utilized in a teaching role. One solution is that foreign volunteers can serve as assistants. “If the outside world wishes to help, its greatest contribution may be in the provision of professional support for teachers” (Lam, 2002, p. 256). While the Chinese teachers are knowledgeable about teaching methods and classroom culture, foreign volunteers are well qualified to be conversation partners or classroom helpers, a role that is often seen in government-run programs in Japan and South Korea.

The inclusion of foreign volunteers does not solve any problems in the Chinese education system. But as Maria explains, suggestions from outsiders are useful for any country willing to listen: “The Chinese are completely able to work in the social area, but maybe they need some external advice sometimes, like every country.” It is crucial for volunteers, sending organizations, and host institutions to recognize, then, that foreign volunteers do not fix things. They are not a long term solution to education staffing or budget problems. They are not going to improve children’s chances for college and a job just by interacting with them for a few weeks or months. The attitude that English-speaking foreigners—especially those with white faces and Euro-American culture—are better volunteers than local people is harmful to all.

Lisa expressed a similar idea about the migrant children she taught: “We shouldn’t have to feel afraid for them, to feel like their caretakers, because they probably don’t really need us as much as we’d like to think they did.” All volunteers want to feel like they matter, like they are making a difference. There is nothing inherently harmful in that; in fact, that desire is probably

impossible to erase. What is important is to recognize what Lisa acknowledged: that these children do not need American or European volunteers to hold their hands. These foreigners are not miracle workers, saints, or any other image of the “white knight” sweeping down to save the poor children of the world.

Instead, foreign volunteers are students. They are learning about life outside of their own experience. They are searching for mutually beneficial relationships, those that make all sides happy that they met and perhaps make small differences in each of their world views. Those “receiving” the service are actually teachers. Without even trying, they teach volunteers about a different way of life, remind them of the important things, and point them in a direction where they can make an impact on social justice. More than anything else, the international volunteer experience is a learning experience, one that impacts both volunteers and recipients internally, externally, and in a way that brings more harmony to the world.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

There are many things volunteers, hosts, and sending organizations can do to improve conditions and relationships in their programming. While the purpose of this study was not to evaluate sending organizations, volunteer effectiveness, or overall satisfaction with the programs, broader themes have emerged that are useful for all parties: open communication, awareness of setting, and a learning attitude.



### **5.3.1 Open communication**

Clear and respectful communication is essential for host communities to express their needs and desires and for visiting volunteers to understand their role. Without open communication, hosts may have unrealistic expectations of foreign volunteers, making volunteers unclear and uncomfortable with their roles. When the voices of both sides are heard, unique combinations of perspectives and skills can advance projects quickly.

Language is also an essential element of clear communication. The volunteers in this study who do not speak fluent Chinese noted that language skills are crucial for making a difference in Chinese education. Volunteers coming to China, even those who will be teaching English, should strongly be encouraged, or perhaps required, to learn some Chinese before beginning their service. The connections they will make through language will strongly and positively impact both volunteers and students.

### **5.3.2 Awareness of setting**

All of the participants in this study knew about Chinese language, culture, and politics to some extent before beginning their volunteer service. Most of them reflected extensively upon their identities culturally, professionally, and politically. While I do not know with certainty that this knowledge and reflection enhanced their volunteer experience, I believe that it does.

An American arriving in China for an educational service project with no previous knowledge on Sino-American relations or the conditions in Chinese schools will have to spend a lot more time learning about those components before feeling comfortable and making a difference in their position. Volunteers who are already prepared with this kind of knowledge

can make quicker and deeper impacts in their service. Sending organizations should make a strong effort to educate their volunteers on the setting where they plan to volunteer. Volunteers must take it upon themselves to prepare to the greatest possible extent their knowledge on who, what, and where they will be serving. The learning that occurs during their service will be much more profound if volunteers arrive mindful and prepared.

### **5.3.3 A learning attitude**

The most vital element of a successful international volunteering experience is a learning attitude. As expressed through the literature review and the volunteer interviews, serving in Chinese schools provides ample opportunity for volunteers to learn and discover things that they otherwise may have never been exposed to. Entering the same setting with an attitude that you will “fix” or “save” the students dangerously borders imperialist, bigoted, and paternalistic attitudes. In the best case scenario, hosts will make it known to volunteers that this kind of attitude is not useful. In the worst case scenario, volunteers with this attitude will make the students feel subordinate and dependent.

Besides avoiding paternalistic mindsets, a learning attitude is beneficial to all people involved in the volunteer experience. In the case of Chinese schools, students learn from volunteer teachers while also teaching them about their culture; foreign volunteers learn about Chinese education while instructing students in various subjects; and foreign and local volunteers exchange teaching methods, cultural anecdotes, and friendships.

Lastly, a learning attitude directly contributes to social justice. Through learning, volunteers are changed internally and externally, ultimately changing the world around them. Through combining local voices and outside influence, schools and students—or any other

volunteer setting—benefit from the open collaboration. All of the players in the international volunteering experience must recognize the paramount importance of learning. Whether they change their name to service-learning or learning-service programs, it is critical that volunteer programs establish learning as the focus of their mission.

#### **5.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

As was discussed earlier, there are many things that could have improved or enhanced this study, including a larger and more diverse sample, a longer time span for interviewing, and making early connections with sending organizations who can provide volunteers to participate.

Furthermore, there are numerous variations on this study that would be useful for understanding and improving international volunteering. As noted in Chapter 2, cross-cultural service learning does not have to be international. Americans working with minority groups in the United States or Chinese serving minorities in China can also produce the elements of intercultural exchange and social justice that were discussed in this study. Any setting and group of people will provide new thoughts and questions on the role of volunteering in promoting social justice. One participant in this study mentioned that there are Chinese volunteers working in Africa. Interviewing these volunteers would be a fascinating look at the changing views of service and social justice by Chinese youth, as well as the shifting Chinese role in international development.

## APPENDIX A

### IRB APPROVAL LETTER



## University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue  
Pittsburgh, PA 15213  
(412) 383-1480  
(412) 383-1508 (fax)  
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

### Memorandum

To: Sara Bularzik  
From: Sue Beers , Ph.D., Vice Chair  
Date: 12/17/2010  
IRB#: [PRO10110101](#)  
Subject: Western Volunteers within Chinese Education: Beliefs, Experiences, and Relationships

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The above-referenced project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board. Based on the information provided, this project meets all the necessary criteria for an exemption, and is hereby designated as "exempt" under section

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Tests, surveys, interviews, observations of public behavior

Please note the following information:

- If any modifications are made to this project, use the "**Send Comments to IRB Staff**" process from the project workspace to request a review to ensure it continues to meet the exempt category.
- Upon completion of your project, be sure to finalize the project by submitting a "**Study Completed**" report from the project workspace.

**Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.**

## **APPENDIX B**

### **APPROVED IRB DOCUMENTS**

#### **B.1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How do you define “volunteering”?
2. Why did you choose to volunteer in Chinese education?
3. What do your family and friends think of your decision to volunteer in China?
4. How have your attitudes about China changed since you’ve arrived?
5. How have your attitudes about education changed since you’ve arrived?
6. What are your responsibilities in your volunteer position?
7. What are your goals in your position?
8. What do you enjoy about your service?
9. What is most difficult about your service?
10. What is your level of Chinese language ability?
11. Describe your relationships with the professionals at your volunteer site.
12. Describe your relationships with the people you serve.
13. To what extent do you consider yourself a teacher?
14. To what extent do you consider yourself a tourist?
15. Do you feel accepted by the community you serve? Why or why not?
16. What is the most significant thing you have learned during your service?
17. To what extent do you think your service has an impact on people or the community?
18. To what extent do you consider yourself an ambassador of your country?
19. Would you recommend volunteering in China to others who want to serve abroad?
20. Should foreigners be encouraged to volunteer in China?
21. Do you think your volunteer position will impact your future career?

22. Do you think your service is needed or desired in China? If so, why?
23. To what extent is your nationality important to those you interact with in your position?

## **B.2 LETTER TO VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS**

My name is Sara Bularzik and I am a Master's student at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. I am conducting research for my thesis on the topic of Western volunteers in Chinese educational settings. The purpose of my study is to understand the feelings, challenges, and experiences of these volunteers during their service. I am very interested in this subject because I, too, have been a volunteer in China.

I am writing to you because you can help me connect with volunteers in China. I am looking for foreign volunteers, generally from North America, Australia, New Zealand, or Europe, who are currently in or soon departing for their service in China. I expect that most of their positions will be as volunteer English teachers, but any unpaid position dealing with education in China is welcome.

Over a period of about three months, I will be in contact with the volunteers four or more times by email. More details are explained in the volunteer recruitment letter attached to this message. My request of you is to send the volunteer recruitment letters to people who fit my research criteria above. If there is a website or message board that you use to communicate with your volunteers, I would appreciate if you could post my recruitment letter as well.

If you are interested in helping me with this, simply forward the attached letter to the volunteers and then tell me how many you sent it to. Please do not make any changes to this letter, as it has been approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board. Once you have sent the recruitment letter, it is the volunteers' responsibility to contact me. You or

your organization cannot collect any research data for me, nor can you answer any questions about my research study. Please direct any such inquiries to me.

Thank you very much for helping me with this project. Without your assistance, I would not be able to carry out my research. Please contact me at [sbb.pitt@gmail.com](mailto:sbb.pitt@gmail.com), or my thesis advisor James Jacob at [wjacob@pitt.edu](mailto:wjacob@pitt.edu), with any questions or concerns.

### **B.3 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**

My name is Sara Bularzik and I am a Master's student at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education in the Department of Administration and Policy Studies. I am conducting research for my thesis on the topic of Western volunteers in Chinese educational settings. The purpose of my study is to understand the feelings, challenges, and experiences of these volunteers during their service. I am very interested in this subject because I, too, have been a volunteer in China.

To achieve my research goals, I will be interviewing current volunteers in the People's Republic of China through e-mail for a maximum period of three months. If you have Skype and would like to communicate with it, Skype oral interviews are also an option for completing the interviews. I will ask about your impressions of China before and after arrival, motives to volunteer, observations about Chinese education, and overall experiences as a volunteer in China.

To participate, you must be at least 18 years old and preparing to serve or currently serving as an unpaid volunteer in an educational setting in China. If you choose to participate in this research, your confidentiality would be protected and your time commitment would be minimal. Every three weeks, for a total of three times, I will e-mail you five to ten questions.

Each e-mail interview will take twenty to forty minutes to complete. I may contact you one or more times after the three rounds of questions to make sure I understand your responses and to verify that I can use your anonymous quotes in my paper. You can participate to the extent that you wish, and you may stop your involvement at any point of the study.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions about my research, please contact me at [sbb.pitt@gmail.com](mailto:sbb.pitt@gmail.com).

#### **B.4 PARTICIPANT CONSENT**

The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of Western volunteers in China working in educational settings. To achieve this, I will be interviewing volunteers currently serving in the People's Republic of China for a period of three months through e-mail and optional Skype conversations. If you are willing to participate, my interviews will ask about your impressions of China before and after arrival, your motives to volunteer, your observations about Chinese education, and your overall experiences as a volunteer in China. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project, nor are there any direct benefits to you. There is no payment for participation. Our interactions will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed. I will be directly quoting interview responses in my research, but neither names nor any identifying characteristics will be tied to them, and they will only be used with your review and permission. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from this project at any time. This study is being conducted by Sara Bularzik, who can be reached at [sbb.pitt@gmail.com](mailto:sbb.pitt@gmail.com) if you have any questions.



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