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Watching, Helping and Learning from China

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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Last week I returned home from an incredible vacation in China, including 4 days in Tibet. It was a complete, refreshing break from work – fun to pack a suitcase without training notes and overhead transparencies! Yet as I begin to reflect on the trip, share my photos and stories with friends, and hang the artwork I bought, I find myself thinking more and more about what the experience taught me about volunteering. So I am using this forum to consider a topic that is “hot” only to me personally, though I do believe it warrants much more attention and exchange among us.

First, Some Background (the volunteer-related stuff is coming!)

Without the remotest desire to provide a travelogue or history lesson, China is different from almost any other country on earth in significant ways. The operative word in defining the country is *huge*. The scale of everything defies imagination: expanses of astonishing mountains and desert, endless rivers, a population over 1 billion with 33 cities larger than 1 million people. Beyond the physical statistics, there is also a future-planning mindset that is rooted in antiquity. Visiting the Great Wall that runs 3,000 miles across inhospitable terrain, or the unearthed thousands of terracotta warriors in Xian, or any of the mind-boggling structures such as the 1,000 room Potala Palace of the dali lamas in Lhasa, Tibet (http://sacredsites.com/asia/tibet/potala_palace.html) impresses the visitor with the builders’ long-range convictions. To devote decades of both creative and back-breaking labor to a project means it’s expected to last.

China today is in the last stage of building the largest dam on the planet (Great Gorges, across the Yangtze River), a project that is breathtaking in its scope. It will create a man-made lake the size of Lake Superior in the US Great Lakes, require the relocation of one million people, provide electricity to millions, and even divert new water sources to the aging Yellow River. It’s all planned out and seemingly on schedule. Construction for the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and the 2010 World Exposition in Shanghai includes wholesale relocation of factories to improve the air quality of both cities in rapid time.

I am not ignoring the political realities of China, neither today nor in the past. Over the centuries, the Chinese have coped with emperors who were brilliant or despots, often both. The 20th century brought the end of royal rule but introduced the most repressive form of communism, including the irretrievable destruction of countless cultural and religious masterpieces. Both forms of government believed in isolation and it's hard to find another nation as unobserved by outsiders for so long. And along with the urban growth there remains a vast population of rural peasants with little access to any of the benefits of modernization or even education.

But now China wants to jump into the 21st century with all its two billion feet. Today, for better or for worse, there is a new veneer of western-style prosperity in the cities and our guide reported that KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) is the most popular spot for a teenage dinner date. Fundamental repression of speech and action is still very real, but many of the superficial restrictions of dress, recreational options, and even individual entrepreneurship are largely gone.

OK, So What about Volunteers?

During a home visit on our third day in China with a delightful 70-something woman in the hutongs of Beijing, someone in our tour group asked through the interpreter, "How do you spend your days now that you are retired from your office job?" The woman began with the usual tale of tea with friends and visits with her grandchildren, but then broke out in a big smile to announce: "I hope to be a volunteer at the 2008 Olympics!"

As the group applauded, Betty Stallings (she and her husband were also on the trip) and I flashed a thumbs-up at each other across the room. I was taken by surprise as I realized the implications of this seemingly-simple wish to volunteer. First, the fact that the woman understood the important role of volunteers at all the modern Olympic cities meant that television and other news stories, even under censorship, had offered an appealing glimpse to the Chinese of the way other countries organize the event. Second, it was clear that the Chinese language allowed her and the translator to articulate the concept of volunteering in this context. And third, I was struck by the evidence that the urge to participate proudly in something big and exciting happening in one's hometown is truly universal.

We came in contact with two other volunteer examples during our trip. The next was in Tibet. Outside of the Jongkhar Temple in Lhasa sat a group of people cheerfully cleaning the wax off a large pile of candleholders. Our guide explained these were Temple volunteers who helped to maintain the rooms for the thousands of daily pilgrims.



Later, in Shanghai, we visited a memorial to the revolution that was accompanied by a wall – just as in the west – listing all the donors who contributed to the structure. We were also aware that one of the newest affiliates of the Hands On Network (the recent name change from CityCares) is Hands On Shanghai. Although it was started to give westerners living in Shanghai a way to give volunteer time to Chinese charities, it is also working to engage local people in projects of their own.



Before anyone challenges me, let me make clear that: 1) I can hardly claim any expertise in Chinese culture based on a three-week vacation; 2) just because Chinese volunteering is new to me does not make it new to the Chinese; and 3) there are undoubtedly issues related to how the Communist government has approached community service (certainly in the past and possibly still today), including mandating some unremunerated work without any semblance of voluntary choice. But, when I returned home I did some Internet searching and, not surprisingly, found a variety of current Chinese volunteer projects and took at face value what they said on their Web sites about themselves. For example:

- New community service projects sponsored by the large company ABB (has been supplying steam boilers to China since 1907), such as: “ Nine volunteers from ABB's Shanghai office visited Shanghai Pudong Elderly house... This is the first time that ABB organized volunteers' visit to weaker people's community in Shanghai . We will take even more opportunities in the future to show ABB's social responsibility.” ¹
- The Shanghai Youth Volunteer Association has been in operation for over a decade and boasts some 300,000 registered volunteers. The criteria for joining the group is being between 14 and 35 years old, healthy and "very devoted to the community work" says Li Jin of the Association. ² Currently the Association is involved in three projects in Shanghai aimed at helping the poor, elderly, and “Mother Nature.” But two high-profile upcoming events, the Shanghai Formula One and 2010 World Expo, has many “full of volunteering fervour.”
- This July, *China View* reported from that 120,000 technicians and one million female volunteers are now working in rural areas for HIV/AIDS prevention and control. Efforts to promote the use of condoms and stem other channels for spreading HIV/AIDS “have been taken in eight provinces under the great help of the United Nations, and remarkable progress has been made.” ³
- The Communist Youth League of China established an office to promote volunteerism nationwide in 1993. Their Web site says: “Barely 10 years ago, many Chinese people still had no idea about what volunteer service was... Now, as young people are organized to help the aged

and the disabled, teach in poor inland villages, or serve in large-scale activities such as APEC and sports games, the idea of volunteer service has become well known to people of all walks of life.”⁴

- There is a Beijing International Volunteers Association with both local and western members (www.civa.org.cn/english/about-us.htm).
- The China Forum on Volunteering and Welfare was initiated in 2002 by the Research Center for Volunteering and Welfare of Beijing University (RCVW) in order to strengthen academic exchanges on volunteering and social development. RCVW held its 7th Forum on International Volunteer Day in December 2003, dealing with some very familiar issues:

*In recent years, volunteer service in China is developing very fast and gains great attention and support from Chinese government. More and more citizens are willing to volunteer and various voluntary organizations are established. How to effectively manage this increasing volunteer group? How to make a full use of the rich volunteer resources? These questions have been aroused great attentions by volunteer service managers and practitioners.*⁵

The international volunteer community has an unparalleled opportunity to watch modern volunteering evolve in China – and both to contribute support and learn new things. It would be terrible if all we try to do is superimpose western volunteer methods onto the Chinese situation (which, unfortunately, is what seems to be happening in eastern Europe). Certainly some practices are universal to success, such as defining work clearly, designating a coordinator, and inviting as many people as possible to join in. But I wonder if the following is being incorporated into modern volunteering to match Chinese tradition and, if so, how it might be exported to the outside, as well:

- The belief that the collective good supercedes individual needs.
- Personal obligations to parents and older people in general.
- Connection to the natural world and the renewing cycle of life (including the belief in reincarnation).
- Comfort in planning many years in advance and the patience to see large and complex projects through.

I do not know how all this will evolve, but I am certain the implications will be *huge*. Further, we need to pay attention to volunteer patterns in all the countries of Asia, since more human beings live in this area than anywhere else on earth, and also because there are growing numbers of citizens with Asian traditions living within our western countries. We have not really learned how to tap this potential volunteer resource, but I’m convinced it is awaiting our outreach.

Do you know more about Chinese or other Asian volunteering? Please share your thoughts with the rest of us.

What do you think we can learn from China or other Asian countries in terms of volunteering?

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Submitted on 6 October 2004 by Debbie Steensland, City of Salem, Salem, OR USA

I recently returned from six months in China, studying Mandarin at a local university.

I would caution you to not take anything you find in China at face value. The highly complex issue of "face" is just one factor that colors the reality of a person's behavior, at least when viewed with traditional Western eyes. The idea of "you wash my back, I'll wash yours" is a crude parallel to their practice of "guanxi", which is often expressed very subtly.

- At the college I attended, I spoke with several Chinese students who volunteered for specific events or for a summer's activity. Their motivation was the same: career advancement. Just as in America, it was likely that the service would look good on their resumes.
- Many, many people volunteer at Buddhist temples because of their religious belief that it earns them merit for a more pleasant reincarnation.
- Regular citizens told me they volunteered because they wanted to advance in their company. These were the same people who smoked cigarettes and studied English (even when there was absolutely no contact with foreigners in their positions) as a way to fit in and look good to their employers.

All of these reasons point to self-centered motivation for other-centered activity, which is certainly intriguing. When I take into account that fear of the government is still very real in the people's everyday lives, I wonder whether volunteering would have much expression in China, if the people were left to their own decision.

Having said that, I would also add that your four points to ponder about the ideas and attitudes the Chinese may be inculcating into their society through volunteering are very perceptive. For example, the Chinese value of a person caring for an elderly family member is an ancient one and still very much respected and practiced. The belief that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few (so to speak) is, I would venture to say, so deeply held by the Chinese as to be an unconscious motivation.

I guess my point is the same one that you alluded to in your article--because the culture of China is vastly different from Western cultures, their methods are not easily transferable to other cultures, if it is even possible at all. China presents an intriguing arena to study volunteering (among other things), but, without an insider's view on the cultural impact, I question whether conclusions drawn from such a study would be valid outside that arena.

I would also echo your sentiment about my observations--I was in a foreign country for a relatively short time, and spent most of that time seeing very little of a large country. It's certainly likely that this limited exposure colors my comments.

Submitted on 5 October 2004 by Betty Stallings, Stallings and Associates, President, Pleasanton, CA USA

Indeed, this trip to China and Tibet was an incredible experience. Thanks, Susan, for your keen insights on our observations of volunteerism in China.

I, too, have been reading in our newspapers about the huge activist response to the serious problem of pollution in China. (see [Susan's response](#)) An outspoken government official (unique in itself) has basically pushed for grassroots activism and has helped organize 174 volunteer student groups at universities throughout China. Government official Pan Yue has said that "public activism and new government policies are essential for China's future. There is not a third road available in China."

The University of Beijing pays all expenses for folks to teach for a week there. It seems that those who specialize in volunteer grassroots activism could be helpful in providing dialog, insights and thoughtful reflection to China's significant endeavor.

Addition submitted on 2 October 2004 by Susan...

After writing this essay, our Webmaster Kristin sent me a link to a fascinating (though disturbing) article titled "China's Environmental Catastrophe," by Joshua Kurlantzick. He wrote it for *The Washington Post*, but it appears online on the Web site of the *Register-Guard* of Eugene, Oregon at <http://registerguard.com/news/2004/09/26/b1.ed.col.china.0926.html>.

After detailing the Chinese pollution crisis, Kurlantzick offers the ray of hope that the situation has gotten so bad it is encouraging rare political protests – and may end up creating a new Chinese Green movement. Yet another volunteer trend to watch.

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