
PÁL NYÍRI *

'My Heart's Anna': Intimacy, Affect, and
Cosmopolitanism among Chinese Volunteers Abroad

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* [p.d.nyiri@vu.nl] (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Abstract

In Europe, youth volunteers are a small segment of a growing and increasingly diverse Chinese presence. Currently limited to Eastern Europe, including a handful in European Union member states such as Hungary and Poland, Chinese volunteers may later participate in domestic volunteering projects in Western Europe as well. As elsewhere, volunteering is linked to other ways of mobility. Studying abroad can be a stimulus to volunteering and vice versa; volunteering is typically accompanied by experiences of sightseeing and nature tourism that are shared with other young Chinese (tourists, students and expatriates). Yet it also represents a potentially new, more compassionate modality of engaging with the unfamiliar. This is significant against the background of the rapidly changing power relations between Europe and China, analyses of which often portray Europe as a hapless target of Chinese greed or manipulation.

Keywords: trans-national volunteering, China, Eastern Europe, cosmopolitanism.

1. *Introduction*

I am Ao Xuan, third-year tourism management student, currently applying for internships in South America and Africa (...) I am thinking, too, of doing a gap year before going to the U.S. for graduate study. (...) In 2013, I visited 6 countries, 40 cities, very ordinary, nothing over the top. Early in the year I applied to be an overseas volunteer in Kenya, East Africa, for a month. I finished in March and went to Egypt. During the summer break, I went to India to volunteer for two months. ... In September, I travelled in Iran for half a month and celebrated my 20th birthday in the desert. (...) For 20 days around the national holiday (in October), I set out from Chengdu to backpack in Tibet and on to Nepal. During the days I spent at school this year, I studied Spanish and brushed up my Korean (...)

In India, (I went) from rejecting to accepting to liking (the country), I learned tolerance (...) I wouldn't want to close a window on understanding a new world by rejecting something. (...) I won't believe any more what people say about the world, I look with my own eyes (Ao Xuan 2014).¹

Ao Xuan's blog posts, circulated on a number of Chinese social media platforms, are a long stream of self-observation and – analysis. She discusses at length the options she is considering for her next volunteering project, including language practice, personal interest and “résumé value,” and offers advice to others. In a later post, she informs her readers that she finally chose to teach English in Guatemala. Her posts are an example of new ways in which young Chinese weave volunteering and travel in poorer countries into their self-making as global citizens, which also include ambitions to study and work in or just experience Western countries. These new ways of engagement with the world are a product of China's emerging middle class sensibilities and reflect a new facet of the globalisation of China's affluence. While the number of Chinese students, young corporate expatriates and lifestyle migrants in Europe is rapidly increasing, Eastern Europe also hosts a growing number of Chinese youth volunteers. This article explores how their volunteering experiences, often of an embodied nature, contribute to a self-professed cosmopolitanism.

2. *Volunteering in China: A confluence of state interest and middle-class sensibilities*

The 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in Sichuan Province triggered a mass influx of spontaneous volunteers from across China. This phenomenon drew attention to the rise of youth volunteering in China, many commentators (e.g. Teets, 2009; Shieh and Guo, 2011) seeing it as a turning point for grassroots civil society. Yet volunteering is often encouraged by the state, local governments or educational institutions, some of which actually mandate a certain number of volunteering hours (Fleischer, 2011). Volunteer work, of course, has its origins in high socialism, but its current wave fits the

¹ All blog posts are in Chinese. Translations are mine.

combination of neoliberal governing techniques with state paternalism that characterises China today. Indeed, it corresponds to state exhortations of moral citizenship (Tomba, 2009), assists goals of environmental protection, and helps deliver services to disadvantaged groups for which the state does not provide the resources (Teets, 2012). Indeed, Jessica Teets, revising her earlier interpretation in the surge of volunteering, now understands it as part of a 'consultative authoritarianism' (Teets, 2013).

Crucially, volunteering emerges from the confluence of state discourse; a popular view of a 'moral void' in contemporary China propagated by intellectuals and the media; the impulse of a new, affluent urban youth to fill that void and 'do good;' and the increasing expectation by employers that job applicants show evidence of meaningful social engagement. This situation displays close parallels to the 'humanitarianization of the public sphere' in Europe and the U.S. (Muehlebach, 2012; Grewal, 2014). But in China, volunteering projects stretch over a range from the completely state-driven (such as at international sports events) to the encouraged (most service delivery projects), the tolerated (work with rural migrant children, HIV patients and other 'sensitive' groups) and occasionally the persecuted when a group is seen as overly independent (such as the rural network of Liren school libraries, forced to close in 2014).

3. The origins of overseas volunteering

Sixty years ago, post-World War II global infatuation with the United States was slowly beginning to fade. Loud and obnoxious American tourists were the butt of scorn around the world, and as the Vietnam conflict dragged on, the motives of Americans abroad were attracting increasing suspicion. In 1958, *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer marked the beginning of a wave of criticism of American foreign policy. The publication played a role in the U.S. government's decision to establish the Peace Corps, an organisation charged with delivering part of foreign aid by dispatching volunteers abroad. It was to improve Americans' image abroad while helping them develop a deeper understanding of the world.

As time passed, international volunteering emerged in more countries, initially as a government-engineered tool of public diplomacy and later as a complex sector with state and private actors that produced an increasingly globalised architecture of aspirations, activities, and support structures. In the fifty years after its founding, the Peace Corps dispatched over 200 thousand volunteers overseas. (After 9/11, both George W. Bush and Barack Obama pledged to double its size as a response to the growth of anti-American sentiments around the world.) Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, founded in 1965, sent over 39 thousand over the same period. The positive impact of young volunteers from the 'free world' on their sending countries' international image was a major factor behind the launch of these schemes during the Cold War.

Today, government-financed overseas volunteering schemes are an indicator of national wealth, openness to the world, and aspirations on the global stage. Two volunteering programmes of the German government, launched in 2008 and 2011 respectively, have already helped nearly 30 thousand young people volunteer abroad. World Friends Korea, started in 1990, has had over 20 thousand participants. The

stated goals of these programmes invariably include the strengthening of international understanding.

But although volunteering is imbued with a universalism reflected in the belief in a shared humanity, volunteers do not necessarily have the same ideals of what constitutes a desirable future. Some attempt to help people acquire skills intended to help them do better in a global market economy; others wish to help develop livelihoods while preserving perceived traditional forms of social organization. Some espouse 'global citizenship;' others act out of a sense of national responsibility or pursue agendas of religious or spiritual salvation (e.g. Watanabe, 2014). In recent decades, international volunteering has increasingly become dominated by NGOs and private non-profits that aim to match aspiring volunteers with the needs of NGO projects worldwide. Andrew Jones (2011) argues that international volunteering, by imparting flexibility and 'global skills' and blurring the distinction between work and leisure, in effect, trains young people for contemporary forms of corporate work.

Recently, global volunteering has expanded to countries with newly affluent citizenries that, not long ago, themselves were recipients of aid. As global hierarchies of wealth change, the distribution of wealth *within* societies becomes more unequal, and affluent populations become more mobile, the direction of volunteer flows becomes more complex. The appearance of young Chinese teaching English in Indian slums, summer camps in Russia, or refugee camps in Lebanon reflects this complexity. At one level, they are individuals who have accumulated particular globalized forms of cultural capital – namely, a degree of mastering the English language, skills and behaviours associated with upward mobility – and are now themselves becoming agents of its spread in a process that, simultaneously, generates more globally expendable social capital for them, in the form of skills, networks, and enhanced resumes in a situation of endemic graduate underemployment. At other levels, they pursue individual fulfilment and help their government's efforts to spread a more favourable image of China.

4. A Chinese Peace Corps?

A senior reporter for *Southern Weekend*, a leading Chinese news magazine, recently suggested that a Chinese initiative similar to the Peace Corps would go some way towards improving China's poor image in Africa (MqVU, 2104). In fact, the Chinese government has a long history of sending 'volunteers' to poorer countries. Medical teams have been dispatched to African countries since the 1960s. More recently, the government has been sending young people to teach Chinese around the world. Although their work is modestly remunerated, it is referred to as volunteering and described in terms of self-sacrifice, skills transfer, and world betterment. The Chinese government has also specifically included the dispatching of volunteers to Africa in the framework of the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation. According to China's first White Paper on Foreign Aid, released in 2011, China had dispatched 405 youth volunteers to 19 countries during the preceding two years. Their duties had included teaching Chinese, practicing Chinese medicine, agricultural technical extension, computer training, and disaster relief. Through a separate channel, the Chinese government had dispatched 7,590 volunteer Chinese teachers.

The government's effort fits into a global pattern of harnessing international volunteering to the service of public diplomacy. More specifically, it is part of China's agenda to create a 'soft power' base comparable to that of the West and Japan.

But for those young people who wish to volunteer abroad, representing their nations is not necessarily an important motivation. The impulse to engage actively in projects perceived to be socially meaningful appears to be a corollary of the emergence of young middle classes around the world. Most organisations facilitating volunteering abroad are not government-affiliated, and some explicitly refer to global citizenship, often tied to notions of global social justice. Canada World Youth, for example, 'envision[s] a world of active, engaged global citizens who share responsibility for the well-being of all people,' and Global Visionaries, based in Seattle and San Francisco, aims 'to educate ... global citizens who promote social and environmental justice' (cited in Schattle, 2008: 78–79). AIESEC,² the world's largest student organisation, with headquarters in the Netherlands, places over 20 thousand student volunteers and interns internationally every year, many through a programme called Global Citizen. Volunteers from countries outside the West account for an increasing share of these. For example, between 2010 and 2012, the six largest sending countries of AIESEC volunteers in the Ukraine were China, Turkey, Brazil, India, Poland, and Indonesia. In Russia, the top senders were China, Brazil, Poland, Colombia, Indonesia and India.

This reflects a fast-paced globalisation of international volunteering, a sector with diverse actors in terms of goals, activities, and target populations, but nonetheless with some identifiable shared values and promises. Volunteering programmes abroad promise their participants the satisfaction of doing good and intimate experiences with people distant from them, most of the time, not only in terms of geography and culture but also in terms of class. Returning home a more authentic person, encountering people who are poorer but happier: these tropes are so widespread in global volunteering that volunteers probably expect to experience them.

5. What motivates Chinese volunteers abroad?

While no comprehensive figures on Chinese volunteers abroad – either government-sponsored or via other channels – are not available, it is clear that their numbers are rising. What makes some young people want to volunteer abroad rather than in their own societies? This choice can be contested: in China, overseas aid is often criticized for diverting resources from the domestic poor. The promise of adventure and exotic destinations may be a draw; the desire to experience the unfamiliar indicates a certain openness to other life-worlds and, perhaps, a sensitivity to 'distant suffering' (Boltanski, 1999) or 'compassionate cosmopolitanism' (Hannerz, 2004: 27). In some cases, actual experiences abroad dampen that enthusiasm, but in others it becomes stronger and more committed, leading to careers in international organisations or academia. For young Chinese, volunteering abroad is such a new phenomenon that it

² AIESEC stands for 'Association Internationale des Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales,' or International Association of Students in the Economic and Business Sciences. The full name is no longer used since the association's membership has extended beyond economics and business.

is too early to say whether it will correlate with career choices or a more open or reflexive worldview. But the blogs and tweets that they post online in copious numbers suggest that, for many of them, it is an eye-opening and much anticipated experience, and one that can involve careful planning. As AIESEC requires every overseas volunteer to publish a blog post on their experiences and many post additional pieces on other accounts, the repository of texts generated in this way can be seen as representative of a large body of overseas volunteers. For this article, I read nearly a thousand blog posts generated between 2014 and 2016.

No doubt, Ao Xuan, the blogger, is a privileged young woman whose family has the means to pay her tuition in the U.S. and, in the meantime, humours her fancies that take her around the world. Her breathless advice-column style of writing sometimes comes across as over-the-top. But her hunger to engage with the world in as many of its aspects as possible is unquestionably sincere, and the circulation of her posts suggests that enough young Chinese find her narration inspiring. Certainly, being well-versed in global fashions or having the wherewithal to study in Western countries does not always produce reflexivity, curiosity, or openness to alternative views, as nationalist demonstrations by well-to-do Chinese students worldwide demonstrated in 2008 (Nyíri and Zhang, 2010). Yet at least some students who leave Mainland China harbour explicit aspirations of 'international citizenship' (Xu, 2015: 33). Ao Xuan is emphatic on this point: 'Why don't we reflect on ... how we force concepts carried from the environments in which we grow up onto people we encounter on those distant continents?'

Like many others, Ao Xuan began her quest by searching AIESEC's offers. AIESEC has been operating in China since 2005. Today, the country is the top source of AIESEC volunteers worldwide. For a fee and after a vetting process, AIESEC matches applicants with projects that seek volunteers and provides advice. In 2013, AIESEC China sent 2,847 volunteers abroad, up from 1,291 in 2010. The number of Chinese AIESEC volunteers in Egypt and Kenya rose from five and nine in the summer of 2010 to 78 and 118, respectively, two years later. In India, they made up 35 per cent of all AIESEC volunteers, so many that the experience of 'diversity' in teams was under threat. This caused AIESEC to reduce the number of placements overall, and in India in particular. In 2014, the number of volunteers from China dropped to 2,754.

While there are no statistics, AIESEC staff say it is the largest provider of volunteer placements abroad in China. Despite the Chinese government's call for more overseas volunteers, however, AIESEC receives no government support. At most universities, it operates – in the words of Célestine Yu, the head of AIESEC's branch at Southwest University of Finance and Economics, a particularly active branch that helped Ao Xuan go abroad – as an 'underground organisation.'³ Some of the more open-minded, smaller schools have allowed it to register as a university organisation, but generally, it is not allowed to advertise, and some universities actively suppress it. This practice is likely to be due to university managements' desire to avoid the risk of incurring government disapproval for working with organisations not explicitly supported by the state, as well as, according to Yu, of being held responsible by parents for students getting into accidents abroad. Although AIESEC's

³ I interviewed Yu during her exchange year at the University of Lille, France, in October 2014.

communication makes no reference to government policy, it is occasionally influenced by the latter. For example, an internal document states that while AIESEC does send volunteers to Vietnam, it is 'unsuitable to build too many partnerships' there 'because of the limitations of the broader China-Vietnam political environment.'

Yu herself first heard about AIESEC in high school. As a first-year student of French at Sichuan Normal University, AIESEC helped place her as a volunteer teaching English in a slum in the Indian Punjab together with other volunteers from Brazil and Taiwan. Although she found the experience poorly organised and physically overwhelming, she nonetheless describes it as transformative, one that changed her from an introverted bookworm into a more open and accepting person and gave her new ideas about the countries her fellow volunteers came from. It was also a cheap way to travel: 6 weeks in India cost her 10,000 yuan (around \$1,600), including the rather hefty 2,500 yuan she had to pay AIESEC.

For many volunteers, Yu said, travelling on a shoestring was the motivation for going abroad. Others wanted to 'add points' to their CVs (some degree programmes in China require an internship, and spending that time abroad was seen as a bonus). Such factors explained in part why most volunteers tended to be business or foreign language students. But many others volunteered for the experience itself. And, Yu added, even those who had other motivations tended to undergo something similar to her own change of personality. One volunteer, writing about her experiences during a month of English teaching in a poor neighbourhood of Surabaya, Indonesia, for an essay competition sponsored by AIESEC and the hospitality site Airbnb, described an overwhelming sense of human warmth and hospitality within her host household and among neighbours. The volunteer, who went by the English name Fiona, stayed at the house of a schoolteacher living in very modest circumstances ('they just had a simple tofu soup with rice for three meals a day') but described a moment when she 'felt I would like to live here for the rest of my life' (AIESEC China, 2014a).

Such moments of elation may be precisely the sort of intimate experiences of the 'other' that volunteers all over the world seek when they embark on their trips, but they go against the grain of prevalent attitudes in China that value economic development, are contemptuous of 'backward' countries – an attitude frequently applied to Southeast Asia – and have no room for romanticizing poverty. Attitudes towards Indonesia are often tinged with specific animosity because of that country's history of discrimination against ethnic Chinese, so much so that a 2012 internal report by AIESEC reassured staff that 'there is no need to be too worried about anti-Chinese' incidents. Yet, although Surabaya has a significant ethnic Chinese population, Fiona makes no reference to ethnic Chinese in her post, and indeed uses the Indonesian name of the city rather than the Chinese one, Sishui.

Even more dramatically than her emotions towards her hosts, Fiona's post laid bare her affection for her fellow volunteers. 'I used to doubt whether I could get along soon enough with young people from a dozen countries,' she wrote, but her misgivings quickly dissipated, and she developed an attraction bordering on infatuation to a young African woman who introduced her to bar hopping:

My heart's Anna, she is such a cool girl! From head to toe, she radiates a Black temperament that's free and easy and at the same time mature. ... She is a

Muslim with her own ideas who charts her own path and accepts no rules.
Words can't express my admiration and love for her. ...

Once having been abroad, many volunteers want to go back; repeat rates are high. Zhang Boyang, a second-year student at Nanjing College of Accounting, went to Kazakhstan to teach English at a summer camp. In her bog post, she voiced a frequent refrain by Chinese volunteers: that Kazaks (or Africans, or Indonesians) are much poorer than Chinese – 'a little like China's level 20 or 30 years ago, but they are really so much happier than we are.' She, too, described returning home a new person: 'I no longer felt that spending time to find out what I was good at or liked was a waste of time: the world is so big, there are so many things to do, it's necessary to take time to explore' (AIESEC China, 2014b). Back in Nanjing, Zhang set up an AIESEC chapter at her college. After graduation, she went abroad again as an intern with Ernst & Young in the Netherlands, and after a year, she was offered a job.

That so many volunteers went abroad again, Yu explained, was in part the effect of developing an international circle of friends. Most of the time these are fellow volunteers, but in some cases they are locals. 19-year-old Wendy describes her parting with the six-year-old son of her black middle class Johannesburg host family in moving terms. Every day he came to her room to wake her up; at night, he bade her good night. Before going to work, she took him to school; most days, she took him out for a treat. When she left, the boy clung to her, crying and saying he wanted to go back to China with her (WengDan13, 2016).

6. *Volunteers' stories*

AIESEC asks every returned overseas volunteer to post a story about her or his experiences. In the months after the 2016 summer school holiday, they posted over 700 of these. The largest number of volunteers went to Egypt, followed by Sri Lanka, Russia, Indonesia, and India. Most went abroad following their first or second year at university and who were, thus, between 19 and 21. A typical stay abroad lasted between one and two months. The most common type of project appears to have been English teaching, but although most projects tend to involve either children or the environment, they cover a rather wide range of settings and interactions. For example, while some Chinese volunteers in Africa worked at rural boarding schools, others visited the homes of poor families in South African townships to deliver food and consumer goods and to play with children, as well as soliciting donations from local businesses. Some worked among large teams of foreign volunteers from all over the world; others were the only foreigners in local teams.

The stories are intended to be testimonials, attesting to life-changing experiences so that more young people would be inspired to join the ranks. (As one of the titles puts it, 'A Bigger World, A Better Self.') They are by no means spontaneous records, even less so than some of the personal blog entries. Nonetheless, they are written in a variety of ways that does convey a sense of the range of settings in which Chinese volunteers work and the effects those have on them. Some are rather dry accounts of the projects, others highly personal and nearly ecstatic, yet others convey a sense of perplexity or introspection; finally, some reveal a genuine interest in the substance of local livelihoods and issues (such as what leads

otherwise kind and funny teachers in Tanzania to use corporal punishment and whether it is effective). Some focus on fellow volunteers, others, such as one of a visit to a South African co-worker's childhood home in Soweto that has one bed for the whole family, describe friendships with locals. A few reflect on the reasons they decided to go abroad; some of these relate to personal crises such as a loss of direction, doubts about choices for the future (often based on parental advice of following peers), or, as one volunteer returned from Thailand wrote, 'a broken heart' that made her 'want to do things I have not dared do before' (Ji Wantong, 2016). Often, preferences for a destination are influenced by earlier impressions. For example, one volunteer chose South Africa because of her interest in jewellery as well as her memories of watching the football World Cup on television.

A frequently recurring trope is that volunteering felt 'like a dream.' The sense of liminality – of a suspension of the norms observed in ordinary life and a consequent observation of one's experiences and behaviour as, in retrospect, 'unreal' – is, of course, typical of volunteering and indeed of travel in general. Such a framing can, however, also work to facilitate narrating volunteers' emotional responses to their environment, not all of which are unequivocally positive. A volunteer at an HIV prevention project in South Africa describes her astonishment at high school girlfriends who go together to get contraceptive injections after school (VeraYoung, 2016). But such accounts convey a sense of grappling with difference rather than rejecting it. Only very rarely does one encounter summary judgement such as that of a volunteer at a youth summer camp in Belarus who labelled cafeteria food – in English – 'ugly and uneatable.' Although she, too, balanced this with a positive assessment of the youth and the teachers, it was clear that the country with its ubiquitous Lenin statues impressed her little.

One of the most engaging reads is an account by Shanny, a volunteer in Egypt who found herself drawn to a female Turkish teammate. Shanny's initially ambivalent attraction to 'Alangu' (a 'Chinese' name she gives her) grows into an obsession as the chronicle proceeds. In the long text, there is little mention of the volunteers' project or indeed of Egypt; most of it is taken up by descriptions and photos of Alangu against backgrounds of bus rides and night revelries under the desert stars. Like Anna, Alangu is a party girl. Her frequent drunkenness and flirting both surprises Shanny (as it goes against her image of Muslims) and, initially, repels her. But her self-confidence and wilfulness also attracts Shanny, and they become inseparable. There is sexual innuendo in Shanny's account of an awkward moment of embracing Alangu and being interrupted by a fellow volunteer (Shanny_Chua, 2016).

The sort of emotional and physical intensity in describing intimacy with former cultural strangers displayed in Fiona's and Shanny's accounts is particularly effective in conveying the change undergone by volunteers. Occasionally, too, there are actual descriptions of romantic involvement – for example, with a Sri Lankan diving instructor. If this unexpected experience of feeling at ease in unfamiliar places and with unfamiliar people is a form of embodied cosmopolitanism, then a very different form is conveyed through references to English-language popular culture and the English- or Cantonese-sounding (thus evoking Hong Kong pop culture) names or online handles chosen by volunteers. The posts ostensibly serve to introduce unfamiliar, mostly poor non-Western societies, and often profess fervent love for the people and their lifestyles. Yet the frame within which local authenticity is to be

understood and appreciated is a global English-language modernity that unites Chinese volunteers with like-minded young people elsewhere, notably other volunteers.

As the blog posts are abundantly illustrated with photos, the same trends can be observed in the visual representations: invariably, volunteers post photos with locals (host families and in the setting of the project, often including children), scenery and monuments, as well as group photos with non-Chinese volunteers. While there is the occasional joy of meeting a fellow Chinese in an unexpected location, the stories frame interactions with locals and fellow volunteers alike in terms of discovering their shared humanity. An alternative frame that would posit Chinese and Nepalis or Indonesians as fellow Asians, and in which Chinese volunteers would have a cultural edge over their Western peers in understanding the people they work with (cf. Yamaga, 2006; Watanabe, 2014) is, at least in these multinational settings, notably absent. Other perceived categories, such as that of Muslim societies as conservative, are often actively questioned. A recurrent theme is religion, particularly Islam, which volunteers typically regard as alien and somewhat frightening but fascinating at the beginning, but come round to see with more ease and, in some cases, approve of as a moral compass. 'Is religion really that alien?' asks the title of one of a post from Bahrain (Ritian xiao gege, 2016). The most perceptive accounts manage to suspend judgement and avoid referring to either Chinese or Western standards. As one post admits, 'I am more of an observer than a volunteer' (Xiao zhu, 2016).

A central theme, and sometimes explicit aim, of the stories is to dispel perceived prejudice in China that views African, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian countries as backward, dangerous, or hostile. A compilation of seven stories by AIESEC Southwest Finance's World Citizen Training Programme begins with listing what the editors perceive as the common view of a country ('the daily life of Indians: raping and being raped,' 'Lebanon: death and decay') and then proceeds to contrast those with volunteers' impressions: Indians respect traditional culture and live in beautiful houses, young people in Beirut go out dancing every night (AIESEC Southwest Finance, 2017). In a post entitled 'An emotional beer with an Indonesian Muslim,' an anonymous male volunteer describes an Indonesian friend in the following way:

Kemas is 22 years old and 185 cm tall; his facial features can absolutely be described as handsome. His prominent nose and chiselled profile give an impression of agility, and the smile on his face makes one feel his friendliness. He is usually dressed in a casual short-sleeved shirt and trousers. In a crowd, no one would tell him apart from a Chinese. If you see him, you definitely wouldn't associate him with Muslims. (AIESEC fu Yinni zhiyuanzhe, 2016)

The author does not need to state that he is writing against the double stereotype of Southeast Asians as short and swarthy and of Muslims as fierce-looking and oddly dressed, and certainly not at all like Chinese. He then proceeds to describe how Kemas, who comes from a strongly observant middle-class family, treated him to a beer and asked him not to tell anyone. In other words, not only did Kemas behave contrary to expectations, but also showed his trust by sharing an experience he kept secret from his parents. The author's conclusion could almost be an anthropologist's:

Western secular lifestyle and the tradition of living as a Muslim may clash in their essence, but in actual life they smoothly find a delicate balance ... In this way, the mosque and the bar strangely but harmoniously coexist. (Ibid.)

Another male volunteer in Indonesia begins his account with listing some of the things Chinese people associate with Indonesia: 'Poor, anti-Chinese, fried rice, volcanoes ... But naïve me believes that "Love can change everything" (don't laugh).' The title of a third post, 'Malaysia isn't a mess, it's paradise' (Luo Zekai 2016), speaks for itself.

Contrast between pre-departure anxieties and reality on the ground is a frequent theme. 'Piglet' writes about the 'strong sense of insecurity that hit' her when her Tanzania-bound plane took off, remembering her mother's admonition never to go out alone in Africa, and the 'sense of comfort and ease' that never left after the first night out under the stars at her destination. A volunteer English teacher at a rural school, Piglet also describes how her initial judgment that her pupils were speaking faulty English changed after she realised that it was possible to be a sophisticated user of English despite following locally specific standards. 'To conclude "This is wrong" without a deep understanding of a new culture is highly superficial,' she decided. She also observed that it required hard work to distinguish between inevitable differences that needed to be accepted as outcomes of different cultural standards and practices that one should insist on changing (Xiao zhu, 2016). A volunteer who returned from Slovakia wrote that the 'point of overseas volunteering is ... not necessarily changing the world, but getting a clearer understanding of this world ... accepting the world's diversity, embracing the world's imperfections' (weiwei, 2016).

Such reflection is particularly noteworthy because it takes place at a time of both rising nationalism in China and an expanded range of encounters with non-Chinese in the context of the globalisation of Chinese businesses. This combination has resulted in a growing perception that Chinese people and Chinese interests are constantly being slighted in other countries. Such suspicions periodically explode in online invective and sometimes offline protest, whether against the Ghanaian government rounding up Chinese miners, the Malaysian government dragging its feet in the inquiry about a Malaysian plane that vanished with a majority of Chinese passengers, or the Vietnam and the Philippines opposing China's claims in the South China Sea. Added to the stereotype of Africans and Southeast Asians as lazy and of Muslims as dangerous (Nyíri, 2006), such issues quickly evolve into campaigns of abuse, threats, and consumer boycotts (Nyíri, 2009). The young urban consumer class, from which volunteers hail, often takes the lead in these. Against this background, the World Citizen Training Programme is particularly significant. It is significant, too, against the background of increasingly unfavourable coverage of the perceived social insensitivity of Chinese corporate expansion in Africa and elsewhere receives in Western media.

This does not mean that the stories are devoid of stereotyping. Often, Indonesians, Africans, Nepalis or Sri Lankans are described as simple, honest (*chunpu*) and happy, adjectives frequently encountered in the more mainstream, unflattering narratives of poorer countries but here meant as positive, though necessarily ambivalent, attributes of premodern societies, akin to the Western narrative of the 'noble savage' (cf. Nyíri, 2013). This perceived contentedness with a

simple life with few material riches elicits a mix of admiration, perhaps even envy, and worry, as in a post by Ada, a volunteer who taught English at a Sri Lanka orphanage. Having first written that 'Sri Lankans are all so kind, simple and honest, and their happiness, too, is so simple,' she relates how she was taken aback when, asked about their 'dream job,' the children, next to 'teacher' and 'doctor' (which were, apparently, appropriate to aspire to in her mind) also mentioned 'driver.' 'At that time, I became a little depressed and thought whether they would stay in this small town their whole lives.' She was heartened when she heard local university students talk about how joining AIESEC made them conscious of the environment, women's rights, and foreign affairs. 'These ideas about becoming world citizens with a global vision gave my heart a spark' (sdxxdadu, 2016). Clearly, Ada felt that, having become a 'global citizen' herself, she was now an agent of that mission.

7. *China House, Nairobi*

Huang Hongxiang, a Columbia graduate in international development, was twenty-six when he founded China House. He also runs a website called 'China-South Dialogue,' devoted to 'citizen journalism' on China's engagements with Africa and South America. During his studies at Columbia, Huang spent several months in South America and wrote about the labour- and environment-related troubles of Chinese mining and metallurgy concerns. After graduating, as a fellow in journalism at a South African university, he wrote an exposé of Chinese involvement in ivory smuggling. He then moved to Nairobi and found a job as public relations officer at a small Chinese company. The company gave him an apartment to run China House and a shoestring budget.

Huang started out as an outspoken critic of both Chinese companies' environmental and labour practices abroad and the lack of Chinese reporting on these subjects, but has blunted his criticism as he canvassed support for China House, which he sees as a vehicle for a more socially meaningful and fair Chinese engagement with Africa, an incubator of corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects that will make a difference, a place where young, open-minded Chinese can meet African peers, and more ambitiously, as a laboratory for a new kind of Chinese-African engagement. As a first step, Huang persuaded his friend, a Nairobi-based manager of the state-owned Chinese company AVIC, to let AVIC sponsor a national precision part-making competition for students of vocational schools.

On the one hand, the story captures much of the contradictory dynamics of China's African engagements. AVIC, whose core business is exporting aircraft and parts, has its roots in the Chinese military-industrial complex and has in the past been subject to U.S. sanctions because of its business with Iran. But Huang's friend, Axel Qi, is a far cry from the standoffish, button-down managers that staff many state-backed Chinese projects in Africa. Qi grew up with the stories of his grandfather, an army doctor who worked in Somalia in the 1960s as part of Mao's aid programme to Africa. (During the 1960s and 1970s, 30 government-dispatched Chinese medical teams worked in nearly as many African countries, setting up rural clinics and reaching large segments of the local populations.) He made up his mind to make his own way to Africa and took the AVIC job because they agreed to send him to Kenya.

In Nairobi, Qi met and married a Japanese woman who works as a development consultant for the Japanese government – China's main adversary – in Africa.

On the other hand, the case of China House also illustrates the way nationalism and cosmopolitanism can be simultaneously present in volunteering schemes. Huang castigates his fellow nationals for staying aloof of local societies in Africa and South America, dismisses their CSR schemes as formal exercises only designed to gain the approval of elites, and has even proposed that Chinese companies in Africa mandate that Chinese employees socialise with their local colleagues. Indeed, Huang has once described his trajectory as leading 'from international public servant to world citizen' (Huang, 2014). Yet he makes it equally clear that the ultimate goal of his efforts is to rectify China's poor reputation in these countries. He envisions China House as a place for young Chinese to meet locals and other foreigners, but this very distinction reveals that he continues to see the world in terms of national groups.

Huang's plan is to provide modest accommodation and contacts to allow ten Chinese interns, volunteers, and researchers to stay in Nairobi at a given time. Huang's partner in the startup, Wang Yuan, who had studied public policy in the United States, is a research analyst at the Sino Africa Centre of Excellence Foundation (SACE), founded by a young Ghanaian businessman with business interests in Kenya and China.

When it opened, China House was an empty apartment with three mattresses to sleep on and piles of books, donated by the Chinese embassy, in lieu of chairs. But the first volunteers seemed unfazed. Within a month, China House was home to a 'fellow' – a postdoc from the Netherlands who studied Chinese land acquisitions in Africa – and a handful of student volunteers, all Chinese but most with international experience or ambitions. One came from Harvard, another from Sun Yat-sen University in Canton on her way to a master's programme at Columbia, and a third from Peking University's law school. Soon afterwards, three young people showed up after resigning their jobs in Peking and Canton. By 23 June 2014, the day Huang Hongxiang turned 26, he says he had received 82 applications.

One of the very first volunteers was Arting, a politics and economics student at Hong Kong University who had received a Hong Kong government scholarship because of her stellar results on the national university entrance examination. During her first two years at university, she did exchanges in Europe and the U.S. In the following year, cutting short a coveted paid internship with an international bank. Arting applied to China House as she had always wanted to go to Africa. In Nairobi, Arting was helping SACE with a survey of Chinese companies' CSR practices in Kenya. Another intern, Richard, also came from Hong Kong, where he was studying marketing and international business management. He, too, first interned at an international bank, but found it unchallenging though well paid. When Arting told him about the China House internships, he quit and followed her. Unlike Arting, he had no special interest in Africa, but while studying, he developed an interest in social enterprises and was attracted to the concept of China House. In Nairobi, Richard was helping China House liaise with Kenyan public relations and social media companies to publicize the student competition sponsored by AVIC.

A third intern, George, was not an academic high-flyer. He completed his bachelor's in public affairs management at a run-of-the-mill university in Mainland China and had just enrolled in a master's in international relations at the University of

Nottingham's Ningbo campus but decided to take a 'gap year' before starting to indulge his 'passion' for Africa. In Nairobi, George was an intern first at a law firm interested in developing a Chinese clientele and then at the Bank of Africa. More entrepreneurial and less driven by social concerns than Arting or Richard, he was nonetheless brimming with enthusiasm for Africa. 'After I came here, my perceptions of Africa totally changed,' he said. 'Good food, good weather, good environment...' After his return from Africa, George wanted to set up a home-grown platform for Chinese students wanting to go abroad and foreign students who wanted to do internships in China.

In fact, there already are home-grown online networks in China facilitate such exchanges, if not quite as focused as AIESEC. In 2011, 22-year-old Chen Lu launched CAPE, a blog to facilitate the exchange of ideas among young Chinese with experience abroad. Chen has been inspired by Ashoka, the global platform for social change with its slogan 'Everybody Can Be a Changemaker,' the influential idea-sharing platform TED, and the 'sharing economy' (Airbnb is a sponsor of both CAPE and AIESEC China, and the CAPE website features the Creative Commons logo). These connections give an idea of the cosmopolitan ethos embraced by CAPE, which quickly developed into a network of volunteers with a supporting digital infrastructure. As of early 2014, over 100 CAPE 'meetups' had taken place in 25 Chinese cities.

A separate circuit, with a home-grown infrastructure with few links to international organisations – and therefore largely invisible outside China – has arisen since 2008 to support disaster relief abroad. After the armed clashes in northern Burma in 2014 sent a wave of refugees to China who were subsequently forcibly repatriated, a network of local volunteers, volunteer translators, online activists and donors emerged to bring – essentially smuggle – emergency supplies to these displaced people inside Burma. After the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, a number of Chinese volunteers flew to Kathmandu with supplies and cash, and an ad hoc network of Chinese translators and activists already in Nepal emerged locally to help direct these efforts. These networks, too, include key members who are outside China, including in Western countries, and who can translate up-to-the-minute news from English posts or provide advice on organising relief. According to a Netherlands-based activist involved in the effort in Burma, volunteers in disaster relief networks tend to be in their 30s or older, including entrepreneurs and managers with time and money to spend, as well as retired army or police officers with domestic disaster relief experience. As with AIESEC, their efforts receive no government support and, in fact, cannot be publicly advertised in China because of government sensitivity to being accused of interference in other countries' affairs. Moreover, on the ground, neither the activities of these volunteers nor those involved in AIESEC projects intersect with the work of official aid teams dispatched by the Chinese Red Cross and other government organisations. They largely inhabit three separate milieus that are spatially separate and differently configured in terms of relations with the local population and government.

8. Volunteers, China, and the world

Volunteers from China and other countries with new middle classes – notably Turkey, Poland, India and Brazil – are certain to become more visible in the coming years.

While governments may try to promote and harness such initiatives for their own goals of ‘soft power,’ the individuals involved may equally leave their imprint on government agendas in the coming decades: that, at least, is what Huang Hongxiang hopes. Women like Fiona, whose Indonesian pupils besieged her with questions about Chinese culture, are exactly the kind of people the Chinese government wants to improve its popular image in Southeast Asia. And yet, remarkably, many more young Chinese volunteers abroad are teaching English – including at the British Way English Academy in Sri Lanka! – than Chinese, even in countries where it is an official language. In other words, they are standing in for native speakers of English in the same way as white Westerners have frequently done in China by virtue of their skin colour. Now, Chinese appear to have graduated into the category of the globally modern that bestows on them the capacity to teach the language of globality. This may not always be a blessing for their charges – and tells a separate, fascinating story about the global state of English – and, as a broader phenomenon, is certainly not without problems, as numerous critical studies of volunteering show. Nonetheless, working in multinational teams, free to form their own ideas about the world, can be a departure from ideas about global development hierarchies that prevail in China.

The few who try to carve out a niche for Chinese non-profit initiatives overseas, like Huang, largely attempt to stay on the good side of the Chinese government, since this is important for the success of their mission to attract more mainstream interest in China. Huang was pleased that China Central Television’s Africa bureau did a story on the opening of China House and that his CSR initiative with AVIC was ultimately embraced by the Chinese embassy in Nairobi – and swiftly appropriated as an activity to be run annually in the future. In an article he probably hoped would be picked up and circulated in China, he described the mission of China House as ‘heralding the peaceful and warm [nature] of China’s going out to the world.’ But, so far, his criticism of China’s engagements in Africa and South America has not become any more muted.

Volunteers are a small group among the growing numbers of Chinese who travel to the poorer countries of the world to do business or work as managers or technicians on projects involving Chinese investment or construction. In general, engagements by these migrants with local societies have been limited, and studies described their attitudes as characterized by a ‘civilizing mission’ to teach these societies how to develop through hard work (Nyíri, 2006). Such attitudes, though present, are remarkably rare in the accounts of AIESEC volunteers. As a growing number of young Chinese work around the world, and not only in rich countries, more of them, like Huang or Ao Xuan, question received wisdom about China’s relationship with the world. They no longer necessarily subscribe to the view that prevails in China, which holds that there is a hierarchy of nations according to economic development, that every nation ought to fight its way up that ladder, and that this fight takes place in a world shaped by a zero-sum rivalry of powers, principally between America and China. An increasing number of young Chinese either explicitly voice their doubts about this view or talk about the world in ways that eschew this framework. Others, however, see received wisdom confirmed by their actual experiences: a volunteer in Indonesia called his stay a ‘month-long lesson in patriotism;’ he was led to this by observing that almost all consumer goods in shops were made in China but were much more expensive than there. ‘Socialism is still the

best,' he concluded semi-jokingly, referring to China's official view of itself as a socialist country (Tan, 2016).

Moreover, a newfound acceptance of diverse lifestyles and views does not necessarily lead to an expanded ability to reflect on the elements of intolerance those views entail. In her long list of attributes of her Turkish fellow volunteer Alangu, Shanny mentions, in passing, that 'she likes paperbacks; the one at her fingertips right now is *Mein Kampf*.' She does not stop to ponder what this might mean, and never mentions her idol's political views, or, for that matter, the political repression that targets young people in Egypt. In fact, many accounts avoid reflecting on political or social issues altogether, although a significant minority does comment on issues such as social inequality and their own privileged position.

Actual contact with a diverse range of locals appears to be one of the main distinguishing characteristics of volunteering, and is built into its institutional architecture and ideology. But such experiences are not limited to volunteers. Just three weeks after arriving in Cote d'Ivoire, a young, French-educated Chinese man working at an international company in Abidjan felt sufficiently moved by what he saw as the discrepancy between the usual Chinese complaints about being victims of discrimination and biased criticism in Africa and the reality of them mistreating locals that he wrote an impassioned blog post for the site of Phoenix TV, the popular satellite television channel. Based on his personal experiences, he methodically repudiated the stereotypes, common in China, that Africans were lazy, looking for handouts, indifferent about delays, and uninterested in learning (Lu, 2014).

In a memoir of serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal, Jim Fischer writes: 'We thought we had answers to other people's problems, but we came away with more answers to our own problems' (Fisher, 2013: 181, quoted in Hindman 2014: 52). As Heather Hindman notes, a debate on the Peace Corps took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with some suggesting that

volunteers themselves should be seen as the product of the Peace Corps experience, not so much as aid workers supporting lands, but as a new kind of American citizen. One author suggested ... that volunteering should be seen as a required part of American and world citizenship. (Hindman, 2014: 52)

This view was underpinned by a survey of returned Peace Corps volunteers that found that while only 25 per cent thought their time abroad had been very valuable for the country they were in, 92 per cent believed that it had been very valuable to themselves (ibid.).

In Europe, youth volunteers are a small segment of a growing and increasingly diverse Chinese presence. For now, they are limited to Eastern Europe, including a handful in European Union member states such as Hungary and Poland. In the future, one may well find Chinese volunteers in domestic volunteering projects in Western Europe as well. As elsewhere, volunteering is linked to other ways of mobility. Studying abroad can be a stimulus to volunteering and vice versa; volunteering is typically accompanied by experiences of sightseeing and nature tourism that are shared with other young Chinese (tourists, students and expatriates). Yet it also represents a potentially new, more compassionate modality of engaging with the unfamiliar. This is significant against the background of the rapidly changing

power relations between Europe and China, analyses of which often portray Europe as a hapless target of Chinese greed or manipulation.

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