

## Original Paper

# Volunteering and the Destinations: Socialisation and Interaction

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### Abstract

*Volunteering has been part of the growing social and economic phenomenon because of the belief that it delivers positive effects for the stakeholders involved. This paper undertakes analysis of the impacts of the Sunflower (xiangrikuei) volunteering program. The research attempts to understand the views of the volunteers, organisers, and destination representatives from interviews, focus groups and observation. The research confirms that while volunteers and organisers do benefit from the experience, the impacts of volunteering on the destinations present a complex mixture of results. While destinations do express their benefits from working with volunteers who bring different skills and influences, they are concerned that volunteers working for a short period of time do not bring enough positive changes but rather disturb the normal local arrangement. Communication may be challenging, and conflicts may arise between volunteers and some local people. The research provides insights for improving the benefits for destinations related to volunteering.*

### Keywords

*China, conflict, destination, impact, positive, poverty, rural, volunteer*

## 1. Introduction and Theoretical Background

As a global phenomenon that became popular in 1970s and early 1980s, volunteering plays an important role in youth development and destination benefits (Pearce, 1992; Lin & Wen, 2020). Volunteers work not only within their own nation but also across borders from highly developed regions to relatively poorer nations (Alexander, 2012). Tourism and travel industry has incorporated this activity and promotes volunteer tourism, which is defined as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (Wearing, 2001, p. 1).

This definition clearly states that the principal goal of volunteering is to improve the situation of destinations and to provide positive benefit to the hosting community. Researchers have made an effort to understand the complex relationship between poverty and tourism. Tourism may provide financial resources for alleviating poverty in job creation and more income for the host (Freire-Medeiros, 2011;

Hall, 2007). Volunteering makes contributions to the destination by taking external social capital and practical skills to help the local community (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

The interaction with poverty may help the youth to believe being happy is more important than making more money because they 'do not mind' being poor in material supply (Crossley, 2012). When volunteers encounter poverty at the destination, they may have three channels to negotiate anxiety when facing problems related to poverty: to treat poverty as a course for moral redemption; to transform poverty into an exotic attractiveness, and to appreciate the place as 'poor but happy' (Crossley, 2012).

Volunteers are motivated to supply assistance to the disadvantaged areas for development not only in the local economy but also in culture and conservation (Crossley, 2012). Zahra and McGehee (2013) confirm the function of volunteering on increasing social capital and poverty alleviation at destinations. Volunteering promotes sustainable development and reciprocity. It promotes the attitude of not objectifying other people and places (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). The high involvement and close interaction and with the host community offers the opportunity of fostering responsible social participation and altruism (McGehee & Santos, 2005; Wearing & Wearing, 2006). Volunteering helps to recreate a new space where a volunteer program creates a channel for the visitors to closely connect with the poorer region, emphasising on sustainability and reciprocity (McGehee & Santos, 2005).

The relationship and interactions between guest and host have become an increasing area for research attention since Smith (1989). Researchers argue for the intrinsic growth and satisfaction that generate between and among guests and hosts in volunteering (Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003). Compared with other tourists, volunteers pursue a closer inter-personal interaction with the host community, while enabling the experiences to incorporate with their own social values (Singh, 2002; 2004). Volunteering allows the youth to experience more interactions with the host across different time spans, often longer than a sightseeing tourist (McGehee & Santos, 2005). The volunteering opportunity may cause value changes and shifted consciousness, influencing both the volunteer and the local people in the process of interaction (Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004). Major channels of interactions include stages of cooperation, competition, conflict, hint, imitation and adaptation (Li, 2012). Positive changes may occur as the result of the interactions, including conservation, cultural renewal, cultural hybridity, and community development (Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003). Research also suggests that volunteer tourism has positive influences on its participants (Wearing, 2001; Gray & Campbell, 2007). Socialisation and interaction improve the sense of wellbeing and personal development amongst volunteers (Lin & Wen, 2020).

However, scholars are also concerned about the potential negative impacts of tourism on the destinations (Smith, 1989; Freire-Medeiros, 2011). Although tourism has the function of alleviating poverty, it is controversial in what degree tourism can improve the economy and in what circumstances it will do (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007; Ball, 2009). When the youth encounter poverty, they may experience shocks and disbelief at the situation of some community (Zahra & McGehee, 2013). Volunteers may

find it difficult to engage in the community-centred approach when dealing with conflicts or mis-communication (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008). Scholars identify similar interactions and expectations among foreign volunteers in Chinese villages (Chen & Chen, 2011), but the traits of Chinese volunteers within China remains to be explored.

There is growing volunteer activity in China. It is popular for the Chinese youth to participate in volunteering programs to make contributions for the public benefit (Lin & Wen, 2020). Volunteering in China is often organised by government agencies or tertiary institutions. Chinese youth have worked in international volunteering programs, including going to Southeast Asia or Europe to help special events with language translation, and teaching Mandarin and Chinese culture in foreign schools. Most Chinese youth volunteers are involved with working to support rural regions in China (Wen, Lin, & Peng, 2018).

The gap between the east coastal China and west inland region is increasing and the disparities across regions and different professions continue to expand (Wen & Tisdell, 2001). Volunteers tend to travel from more affluent regions to less developed communities to engage in teaching, training, and other programs to help with alleviating poverty (Lo & Lee, 2011). Some college students have established their own volunteer organization to start programs helping people in rural China.

Sunflower is an organization taking students in Zhenjiang, one of the well-developed cities in China with a high income per capita, to rural villages in Jiangsu Province to teach and to introduce advanced technology to rural schools. It started in 2007 at Jiangsu University. The program aims to provide educational support for regions that are damaged by natural disasters, as well as rural regions in Jiangsu Province. Sunflower aims to provide education courses to rural students who do not have sufficient access to resources. With the vision to be the leader in volunteering for college students, the program provides activities to promote self-development and dedication to the disadvantaged population. Volunteering teachers focus more on improving the thinking modes of rural children. Volunteers also raise awareness of the alarming situation in some disadvantaged areas by riding and hiking. Volunteers are encouraged to ride bicycles from Zhenjiang to rural villages in Zhangjiagang, Taizhou and Yancheng during July to September. Normally, around 70 students are recruited every year. Sunflower also collects donations to help rural Jiangsu. Although Sunflower receives positive evaluation from the destinations regarding the impacts of this program, there appears to be mixed opinions on the potential negative effects on the host community.

This research attempts to analyse how volunteering impacts on the destinations, both positively and negatively. The research question arises after careful analysis of the literature: How much does volunteering contribute to the destinations? What are the major impacts on the host community? The author makes effort in addressing these questions in the paper.

## 2. Research Method

The author followed the progress of the Sunflower program and did literature review to establish the theoretical framework. People who had volunteered in Sunflower were contacted for their willingness to participate in the research. The author joined the volunteering team in October 2019 and stayed in Taizhou for three days to undertake the research on site.

Most of these research was qualitative due to the characteristics of the research objects. The research collected data from in-depth interviews and personal observation. Interviews were conducted with four respondents who volunteered in Sunflower in 2018. In addition, eight interviews were conducted in Taizhou with volunteers who were working there. The researcher conducted interviews with eight local residents in order to elicit the opinions of the destination on Sunflower program. There were eleven males and nine females in total to keep the gender balance. Sampling was random and voluntary. Each respondent was interviewed individually to explore the deep, personal and experiential aspects of their feelings and opinion. All the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed to ensure the accuracy of data.

## 3. Findings and Discussions

With interaction at the destinations, volunteers exchange ideas with the hosts and influence the mindsets of the local people. Socialisation occurs between and among stakeholders involved with volunteering. Destinations may experience a mixture and benefits and issues from volunteering.

### 3.1 Multi-Channel Interaction

Interaction between participants stages complicated features during volunteering. While researchers have explored the complexity in volunteers interacting with their peers, team managers, and students, interaction with volunteers presents a different set of challenge from the perspectives of the local eyes. Volunteers work with the local teachers, who may have different ideas on teaching. Some local people lack the Mandarin skills because they speak the local dialect. While the local students enjoy new ideas from volunteering teachers, they may feel difficult to adapt to the new class rapport initially. The school principal has to keep the balance between adding new contents in class delivery by volunteers, and keeping the consistency of syllabus. There may be argument between the volunteer and permanent teacher regarding teaching method or content presented in the class. The local principal makes this comment:

Interacting with people you do not know well is not easy. I spend a lot of time insolving problems between volunteers and the local teachers when they have conflict on how to teach. Local teachers tend to become agitated when the young volunteer insists on a different way of teaching. Over reaction on difference may lead to unnecessary disputes.

Volunteers complain about the difficulty in interacting with the local teachers. While the volunteers understand that they are inexperienced, they feel that they are treated as the juniors or subordinates in case of any argument, as one volunteer reflects:

I wish to be respected as the equal partner, especially before the students. If I play the role of accepting orders from the permanent teacher, my students will not respect me or listen to me. I appreciate discussion in interactions rather than having to follow ideas that I do not agree with.

### *3.2 Socialisation*

When young volunteers encounter real life in remote China and negotiate with poverty related attitudes, they experience acceleration in socialisation and mature quickly in their worldviews. One volunteer appreciates her luck:

I used to be a “spoiled princess” by complaining about noisy accommodation, tasteless canteen food, and even my look. I came to realise that I have been very lucky in having the opportunity to learn, travel, and study at well-equipped schools after volunteering. China is a big country with many rural people living in poor conditions. I have so much more than the local kids. I need to work harder as a return for my family and the country.

Volunteers’ parents are normally supportive and provide extra family resources to assist the volunteers in their study and financial needs. Children in rural China often live with the grandparents because their parents are migrant workers in Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, and other big cities. Their parents may come back home once a month or even once a year, requiring the children to helping with farming occasionally. Some local families may experience difficulty in finding labour to help with the farming activity, and children have to work for the family for a few days instead of going to school. While the local teachers make allowance for the temporary absence of students, volunteers find it unfair for the local family to force students missing classes. Tensions may rise between the volunteers and parents when volunteers visit students’ home trying to persuade the students to attend class. One grandfather complains:

The volunteer makes me feel very guilty when my grandson misses three days of school working in the rice paddocks. I need him to work with me because I cannot do the work myself, and we cannot afford to lose the crop. The volunteer just thinks for the class but not for the local family.

### *3.3 Impacts on the Local Community*

Volunteering initiates long term impacts on the volunteers in terms of socialisation and personal growth. In addition, volunteers bring new ideas and attitudes into the destinations interacting closely with the local hosts, and causing significant changes on the destination. They make use of the local consumption goods injecting cash into the community during their stay. They establish close relationship with the local students and colleagues, and introduce external resources, especially investment and business opportunities, to work together with the locals. One volunteer is very proud of her contribution:

This is my third trip here. After I completed my first trip I told my father about my experience. He was very interested and came here during my second trip. He runs a computer business, and donates computer related equipment to the local school. My dad keeps in contact with more local people than I do.

Volunteers appreciate the local heritage and folklore, and even bring friends back for holidays to enjoy

the local festivals and cuisine. The locals realise that they are the owners of valuable cultural and natural attributes. What they take for granted may be a rare type of attraction for external people. Exposure to volunteers helps the locals establish more confidence, along with an enhanced sense of pride in their hometown. One local lady is content with her business:

Volunteers helped me to start a farm stay business to cater for holiday makers to enjoy the quiet country life with fresh produce. Volunteers are now my business partners because they can market online and bring constant visitors. I employ three local ladies during the Spring Festival season to help with my operation. Life is really great now.

Learning from college students presents an exciting experience for the local students, and they appreciate the stories and dreams volunteers introduce not only in the classes but also during extra curriculum activities. Volunteers share sports and game time with the local students, extending the education from classrooms to playgrounds. Life-long friendship develops as a result of interactions and trust. One local student is very proud of his stay at the volunteer's home:

Ming was my teacher and became a friend with my family last year when she was volunteering. She invited me to stay at her parent's place and I had a fantastic week with her family. She just opens up my eyes and I speak with her on Wechat regularly.

Complex impacts are challenging nevertheless. Families report to the principal that with the influence of the volunteers, children express more dissatisfaction with their village or family income, and demand the opportunity to travel to big cities. While it is a positive sign that the local students learned from the volunteers about the exciting outside world, the contrast between the affluent city and deprived rural area may lead to frustration, or even anger, among the local students.

Peaceful rural life is new to many volunteers, and they enjoy visiting the local families for chats and meals. While the locals welcome the volunteers, they sometimes feel they are being examined like gold fish in a bowl. The discomfort of being under constant observation of the volunteers, who stay longer than a random tourist, may produce stress in the local community.

Due to the disparity between rural and urban China in income and access to services, the lifestyle between the volunteers and local people can be very different. While cooking with dry tree branches may be fun to the tourists for a while, the lack of convenient supply of basic utensils is challenging to work with. Electricity supply is inconsistent and people use buckets to fetch fresh water from a public water station that is half a kilometer away from the school. When volunteers make jokes about not being able to use washing machine or a clothes dryer, the local host feels guilty in not supplying what volunteers need. The school headmaster expressed his concern:

I know the volunteers are joking with they talk about wearing damp clothes because there is no clothes dryer. But the contrast of different life styles may dwarf the locals and they feel guilty of not treating the volunteers well enough.

### *3.4 Long Term Solutions?*

Volunteering programs are often organised between the university and local governments, with very

little input from the local school. In case of any change of the key people in the organisations, volunteering program may be modified or terminated. Consistency of the program is not guaranteed. One local teacher made these remarks:

I make plans to make sure my teaching can continue without volunteers. Last year volunteers were expected to arrive in middle July but they did not arrive until early August because the organisers changed plans without notifying us.

Volunteers feel powerless at times when they realise that they are temporary players, who do not know whether they will have a chance to come back later. They may start some program although they may not guarantee the continuity of the assistance. One volunteer expressed her concern:

I help a student by walking her to and from school because she needs assistance due to her problem with the legs. However, after I return, she will not be able to attend school on rainy days because her grandpa is sick in bed. I hope there is a long term solution to help the student but it's beyond my capacity.

#### 4. Conclusions

Volunteering provides positive benefits for all stakeholders involved if it is well planned and managed. However, from the perspectives of the destination, the impacts of volunteering are complex. While it is true that volunteers provide a wide range of assistance for the host community, including economic input, cultural awareness, heritage revitalisation, and expansion of local vision, they may indeed become part of the conflict generated from mis-communication, organisational deficiency, short term views, and so on. While volunteers are appreciated and respected in the local community, they have become scapegoats or targets of blame when things go wrong.

Further research would provide observation over time and how attitudes shift across time. Research is also needed to compare a few similar volunteering programs in order to decipher the complexity in designing and managing a volunteer program that maximises the benefits for not only volunteers but also the local hosts.

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