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## **Bridging Cultures through Unpaid Labor:**

### **U.S. Volunteer Teachers' Experiences in China's Yunnan Province**

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#### ***Abstract:***

International volunteering has become a complex field in the context of globalization. Within the discourses of international volunteering and development programs as well as in the voices of volunteers, the field can be understood as one of unpaid transnational labor, as social activism and altruism, and as a new “soft power” post-colonial agenda. Many studies contend in this context that international volunteers need better training for intercultural understanding amidst these disparate frameworks, to make meaning out of their service and effectively contribute to communities they serve. This study examines the motivations, experiences, and challenges of U.S. volunteer teachers in China's Yunnan Province as reported within a survey implemented in 2012. Findings elaborate on the challenge volunteers face reconciling cross-cultural views of education while working in post-colonial global contexts, and suggest intercultural training is necessary to prepare volunteers for related global work practices in the future.

***Key words:*** volunteering, intercultural understanding, exchange, China, development

## INTRODUCTION

With the increasing interconnectedness brought about by globalization, our understanding of work has evolved. In particular, due to unprecedented technological progress and the changing labor demands that characterize the neoliberal economy, the organization and experience of work is continually being restructured and transformed (Glucksmann 2005). The designation of “work” no longer pertains only to “paid activity that exists in isolated workplaces and occurs during specified periods of time,” but now also encompasses, as Jones points out, “domestic work, voluntary work and activities embedded in a wide array of other social relations” (2011, p. 530). It recognizes, to a greater extent, unpaid contributions to households, communities, and public formal spheres, which extend the contemporary concept of work to include economic as well as socio-cultural dimensions (Glucksmann 2005; Jones 2011). It also includes increased awareness that work is performed in global or “glocal”; not merely local contexts, and those contributions of the good citizen or “good Samaritan” can occur in porous cross-border locations, beyond one’s zip code.

Among such increasingly recognized unpaid work activities, international volunteering and service has become popular in recent decades. Traditionally, such volunteerism has been held as beneficial, both to host (typically developing) countries and communities, and to volunteers (and their communities of origin) themselves: as a promising act of peaceful cultural exchange, facilitating productive dialogue and experience across boundaries and, in the process, bridging cultures in ways that can enhance future cross-national engagement (Bodomo 2012). However, while some accounts illustrate how meaningful intercultural encounters arise from international volunteering and service (Holmes and O’Neill 2012; Martin and Griffiths 2012), others emphasize the potential challenges that accompany such initiatives today. These latter

orientations question whether international volunteering and service can improve international cooperation when, as Jones argues, “a range of motivational factors are often behind an individual’s choice” to volunteer (2011, p. 534). Some contend relatedly that international volunteering and service is akin to long-haul tourism that benefits disproportionately the volunteers (Desforges 2000; Jackson 2014a). Others further argue that, instead of challenging hegemonic worldviews and colonial patterns, international volunteering and service actually perpetuates and reinforces, as Martin and Griffiths put it, “the very stereotypes and attitudes the [international volunteers] seek to change” (2012, p. 914).

Education is one of the primary fields of international volunteerism and service, and in the last decade, volunteer teaching has been increasingly used as a means to improve education in developing contexts, with college-educated volunteers being recruited to work in schools around the globe. Such volunteering is seen as a way to enhance work skills and social capital among volunteers as well as to develop mutual understanding across cultural divides. Of course, in order for such volunteers to be effective, they must also have realistic understandings of the educational workplaces and communities they enter into, as well as the implications of their cultural differences to their efficacy as volunteer educators (Martin and Griffiths 2012). In particular, more precise data is needed to enhance such international educators’ preparedness, understanding of cross-cultural and educational differences, related potential challenges in specific volunteering and exchange contexts.

This paper examines one site of international educational exchange and volunteerism, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of United States (U.S.) volunteer educators working in the Yunnan Province of China (People’s Republic of China) from 2012 to 2013 (and beyond). Former and current U.S. volunteers working for one international education and development

program were surveyed in Spring 2013 regarding their motivations, background, and experience with China and with teaching; their satisfaction with their experience; and their perceptions of differences and challenges while working in Chinese educational institutions. The findings from this study can broaden and deepen understanding of contemporary cross-cultural differences in education between the United States and rural China (Yunnan), assisting stakeholders to better anticipate challenges people may face in participating in such United States-Chinese work and educational exchanges in the future. They can thereby inform the work of international educators in the future, particularly those involved with United States-Chinese education and development exchanges, and serve as one case for examining the significance of cultural differences and related issues to volunteer experiences and outcomes.

## **PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERISM**

### **Purposes of International Volunteerism: Leisure *and* Labor?**

Sherraden et al. define international volunteering and service as “an organized period of engagement and contribution to society by volunteers, who work across an international border in another country or countries” (2008, p. 397). It is also “recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant” (Sherraden 2001, p. 5). Similarly, the United Nations emphasizes international volunteering and services as “actions [that] are carried out freely without coercion”, not motivated by “financial gain”, and benefiting those “other than the volunteer” (Devereux 2008, p. 359). Though freely rendering service to others in a foreign country dates back to colonial times and the activities of missionary groups, it was more popularly embraced after the establishment of the United Nations at the end of World War II as a means to enhance development, in recognition of increased interdependence and the importance of international cooperation to global peace (McBride and Daftary 2005). It was thereby seen (as

it is often still seen today) as a strategy to achieve global objectives by countering globalization's potential to exacerbate global inequalities (Brav et al. 2002; Devereux 2008; Hytten 2010).

Today many people across societies value international volunteering and service as government, non-profit, faith-based, and corporate organizations send volunteers overseas in a wide variety of missions (Devereux 2008; Lough et al. 2009). Though over 90% of international volunteering and service programs are overseen by organizations based in North America and Western Europe (McBride and Daftary, 2005), volunteerism in Asia and particularly China is on the rise, to serve both local and distant areas and regions (Li 2005; Brautigam 2009; Zhou and Shang 2011). Yet in spite of the tremendous growth of numbers, modes, and sources of international volunteering and service, scholarly work "lags behind the status of programs and policies" (McBride and Daftary 2005, p. 3). As Lough et al. note (2009, p. 3):

This lack of knowledge is amplified by the expansion of diverse types of programs and organizations sending volunteers overseas. Across these different types, the expressed outcomes are often the same. However, it is most likely in practice that the different program types produce different outcomes.

Among various possible program outcomes, international volunteering and service has been criticized for the potentially self-serving, rather than purely altruistic, results of volunteers and programs (Devereux 2008). In several cases, international volunteering and service has been implicated to perpetuate power differences between the server and served, promoting more powerful states' interests and "soft power" political agendas, when government representatives get involved with host-country civic life, potentially undermining individual rights and empowerment of those apparently served. In such cases critics argue that it essentially maintains the ideologies of imperialism by disguising neo-colonial practices as programs of intercultural

understanding, good will, aid, and development (Brav et al. 2002; Jackson 2014a). As Jackson observes (2014a, p. 256):

a [volunteer-initiated] garden is not just a garden, but represents acquiescence.... In asking a community to consider a garden, the [volunteer] paradoxically asks it to buy in to (and accept) its own deficiency, its own lacking: to not just accept, but to act on the acceptance, that [he or she] knows best.

Relatedly, at the individual volunteer level, different understandings of what characterizes the field of volunteerism, or what constitutes volunteering, have been seen to impact the motivations and expectations of volunteers. As Nichols argues, different conceptions of volunteering, as a kind of “serious leisure”, as unpaid work or service, and/or as social activism, can have varying impacts on a volunteer’s overall “psychological contract” (their expectations about their participation). For example, volunteers who emphasize the unpaid-work aspect, will desire transactional rewards in their service, while those who see their work as social activism will view their service as the embodiment of their ideological views (2013). Thus, when being recruited by international volunteer agencies, some volunteers may be attracted to the viewpoint that their service (unpaid work) will be, as a recent slogan of the U.S. Peace Corps, “the toughest job you will ever love”, while others may be attracted to messages of adventure (“serious leisure”), or of making a difference and fulfilling social responsibility (social activism).

Recently, several observe a growing trend of gap-year activity, wherein a period of time is set aside between completion of formal education and traditional formal employment within developed societies for young people to engage in international volunteering and service. The latter is seen not as labor, but as “serious leisure”: a means to “take a break” after schooling, while preparing for global work by building up social capital and acquiring knowledge, skills,

and attitudes seen as necessary for the dynamic contemporary transnational labor market (Jones, 2011, 2008). Such “serious leisure” is widely held in industrialized societies not only as beneficial for the volunteer recruits but also for their future contributions to their own society, since their international exposure and experience enable them to construct professional self-identities, while becoming integrated into increasingly global domains of work (Desforges 2000).

“Serious leisure” need not be seen as mutually exclusive to other volunteer motivations, such as social activism and unpaid work, particularly in the field of education. In fact, many studies show that education volunteers often include altruistic reasons as foremost among their motivations, especially when serving in developing areas (Chow 2009; Lombas 2011; Zhou and Shang 2011; Chang et al. 2012). As seen in the study of 291 participants from two US-based non-profit organizations by Lough et al. (2009), personally facing challenging or meaningful experiences, making a difference by helping others, acquiring intercultural understanding, travelling or living abroad, and gaining international experience and language skills are all among primary reasons given by participants for deciding to volunteer overseas. Thus, selfish motives can mix with altruistic motives, as volunteers aim to gain something personally while also serving others.

### **Disparities in International Volunteerism: Expectations vis-à-vis Reality**

Altruistic and social-activist motivations that volunteer recruits may have about rural contexts and development needs can be quickly undermined by volunteer field experience, however. For instance, in Zhou and Shang’s study, Chinese-based volunteers teaching in rural China expressed disappointment particularly with the high physical level of development of work sites, because they believed that “harsh living conditions and the resultant physical

suffering could make their experience more worthwhile and their actions feel more altruistic and heroic” (2011, p. 582). Such an understanding that their altruistic intentions as development workers should be somewhat related to experiencing *physical* forms of adversity is not only unique to volunteers in (or from) China. The “super volunteer”, as described by Lombas (2011), is a common model for many volunteers (and volunteering organizations), despite the fact that volunteers are not always free to choose their country or community placements (though they can reject in some cases an unsafe or otherwise undesirable initial site placement).

These disparities between expectations and realities can undermine the volunteers’ capabilities for cultural adaptation to communities and work sites. Due to a lack in training to critically understand factors that give rise to inconsistencies between physical and social-capital development, superior and ethnocentric approaches to recipients of development aid can unduly influence how volunteers understand and carry out their development work (Cook 2012; Jackson 2014a). For instance, the Chinese teaching volunteers in Zhou and Shang’s study, instead of becoming “angels to the children”, felt little appreciation for what they could contribute locally, as children seemed selfish to them, asking them for gifts (2011, p. 583). As a result, negative attitudes towards altruism, development, and teaching can arise, demanding critical attention and systematic revision of volunteering programs if volunteers’ efforts in such circumstances are to make an effective, positive contribution, to their own development or that of the community they serve in (Cook 2012; Jackson 2014a). Even for volunteers interested primarily in cultural exchange, it has been observed that mentoring and counselling should be better implemented in order to address culture shock, which can make even familiar aspects of the new culture seem unfamiliar to volunteers, as the perceived differences of values, weather, food, and more, can appear exaggerated and, to a certain extent, become disturbing (Chang et al. 2012, pp. 238-239).

In more cases, disenchantment regarding ideals and realities occurs as volunteers develop a sense that, as Lombas points out, “the aims of the development organizations appeared incongruent with village needs” and realities (2011, p. 112). It has been observed that some within the Peace Corps volunteer community developed a cynical feeling through their experience, believing that their mission was more of a diplomatic than developmental one, since international engagement, rather than productive development and community improvement, was apparently more vital for the Peace Corps organization itself (Jackson 2014a; Lombas 2011). In the guise of benevolence and philanthropy, international volunteering and service such as within the Peace Corps, as its critics note, becomes a subtle form of dominating and exploiting others, legitimizing U.S. influence over the rest of the world in an era wherein military colonialism is no longer acceptable (Brav et al. 2002; Lombas 2011; Jackson 2014a).

Despite such criticisms, many people in the United States (and elsewhere) continue to be drawn to international volunteering, resulting in a surge of new volunteers and diverse organizations setting up civic service programs (Lough 2013). Additionally, most international volunteers view their experiences as more positive than negative in relation particularly to the development of transnational or global work skills development. In the study of Chang et al. (2012), many volunteers learned to appreciate their own cultural background and see international development in a more objective light as a result of their international exchange. Additionally, in a survey of 680 U.S. international volunteers, most of the respondents commonly described their service as not only personally satisfying but also transformational (Lough et al. 2009).

Yet for volunteers to consider their international experience as satisfying and transformative nonetheless requires that they are able to make sense of as well as finding

meaning in their service, in the context of likely discrepancies found between their expectations and the realities they encountered. This inherent search for understanding, as Mezirow points out (1985, p. 17):

...is to enable us to understand the meaning of our experiences and to realize values in our lives. For the most part, we learn new meanings by spelling out an experience or an aspect of an experience that we have not yet made explicit and by seeking to validate our interpretation of its meanings.

Developing such understanding necessitates not only knowing the “how” by determining what actions are appropriate cross-culturally and in the political-economic context of international service and labor, but also discerning the “why”, by gaining insights from interactions that occur as a volunteer “self” relates to and with the “other” in the field. It requires engaging in an intercultural conversation while recognizing “dependency-producing psychological assumptions” that are acquired through the socialization process earlier in life but have lasting imprint on the manner in which the “self” views and relates to or with the “other” (Mezirow 1985; Martin and Griffiths 2013).

Thus, varied efforts to develop intercultural competence and cultural adaptation among international volunteers will not be effective if these individuals, as Martin and Griffiths note, are not aware of how they “position themselves in intercultural conversation” (2013, p. 3). As seen in a survey of Peace Corps (2009) English teachers serving in the Gansu, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Chongqing provinces, volunteers described their existing preservice training as the least adequate or effective means for preparing them to work with counterparts in their site placements, while, as mentioned previously, even Chinese-based volunteers in China faced dramatic challenges in terms of cultural and workplace understanding, adjustment, and performance. Problems similar

to these will occur inevitably if there are no “postcolonial spaces for learning” on how and why volunteers “think about and relate to others” (Martin & Griffiths 2012, p. 919-920; Smith et al. 2013).

In order to thus transform one’s perspectives and frames of reference, habits of mind first need to be critically examined and reflected upon (Mezirow 1985, 1997). This is particularly important in volunteer placements which are held as culturally distant and politicized, such as the case of U.S. volunteers teaching in China. Such examination must start with exploring the expressions and experiences of those participating in international volunteering and service within concrete, contemporary contexts to inform those involved with educating such potential volunteers in the future as global citizens in a world marked by disparate understandings of volunteerism, global participation, labor and leisure, and so on.

## **METHODS**

To explore the cross-cultural differences in teaching and learning practices between the United States and China as well as related cultural and workplace challenges encountered in such cross-national educational engagement, a survey was conducted of U.S. teaching volunteers who served in Yunnan Province, China, from 2012 onward through one international organization that aims to address educational inequalities in under-resourced schools in China. Once ethical approval was obtained, a questionnaire was developed from related instruments (Costanzo 1981; Linse 1989; Beiber 1999) and in collaboration with current and past U.S. volunteers as well as related administrative and program staff from multiple development organizations, including regional and country-level staff of the Peace Corps.

Upon two pretesting and revising phases for face validity, the questionnaire was administered via Google. As part of a larger study on international exchange programs, the

survey was open to U.S. citizens who had served or were serving as volunteer educators abroad for more than 6 months. The requirement that volunteers had served for more than 6 months helped ensure that most volunteers had already experienced the most dramatic culture-shock phase typically experienced in international volunteer experience, as research has shown that those living in a new culture undergo a U-shaped or J-shaped curve of emotionality, with excitement or frustration most prominent shortly after arrival in the new culture (Chang et al. 2012, p. 236). Contact was made with administrative staff and volunteer representatives from numerous educational exchange organizations within and outside China to get assistance inviting and encouraging volunteers to participate in the questionnaire on a voluntary, anonymous basis.

Collected data via the Google forms program was exported and sorted for the purposes of this study, to analyze responses from participants volunteering as educators in Yunnan province through one international organization. Data was processed and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 21). Scores were attributed to responses given by the participants to statement-questions regarding cross-cultural comparisons of observed educational norms and practices between the United States and China. Mean and standard deviation were determined on these numerical variables and one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test at 95% confidence interval was performed to establish if there were significant differences in respondents' perceptions of education and understandings of teaching and learning in the United States and China. Frequency and percent distribution were obtained on nominal variables related to participants' responses regarding motivations, challenges, and areas of satisfaction. To determine if there were significant differences among respondents with regard to their motivation, challenges, and satisfaction, non-parametric statistics, such as Chi-square tests and, when necessary, binomial tests, were performed at 95% confidence interval. Gathered data obtained through asking open-

ended questions in the survey were further analyzed through discursive techniques, enabling triangulation of findings through the use of mixed methods.

## **RESULTS**

Twenty-nine volunteers, who served with one educational program in Yunnan Province from 2012 onward, were included in the data analysis. They represented 80 to 90% of the target population, given reasonable estimates of the number of eligible participants from the said cohort (as volunteers can leave the program at any time).

### **Description of the Study Population**

The international volunteers participating in this study were an average of 24 years old. They did not significantly differ by sex, age group taught, work site description, familiarity with China through their studies in higher education, volunteer organization training, or local language mastery (Table 1). The majority of these international volunteers were White/Caucasian ( $p=.000$ ) with at least 18 months of service ( $p=.000$ ). Most of them did not have an undergraduate degree in education ( $p=.000$ ), certification in teaching ( $p=.000$ ), and prior experience working in educational institutions ( $p=.000$ ) or teaching English as foreign language ( $p=.003$ ). The majority had lived or worked overseas previously ( $p=.001$ ), but few claimed familiarity with Chinese culture or China's educational system through past exposure ( $p=.000$ ) or independent research ( $p=.001$ ).

### **Motivations of Volunteers**

Around 72% of the respondents identified making a difference and helping other people as the "most important" for their volunteering as international educators, whereas only 7% considered it as "not at all important." More than half additionally expressed that experiencing a challenge and achieving something extraordinary was also among the "most important" factors

for them, while 35% deemed it “important.” Approximately 90% stated that becoming a better person was either “most important” or “important” consideration that motivated them to join an international organization as volunteer educators. The majority also regarded travelling to different parts of the world and gaining practical career experience as “important” reasons that influenced their decision to volunteer. Notably, few indicated that escaping the demands of ordinary life or taking a break from reality was important for them (Table 2).

### **Perceptions of Educational Differences and Challenges**

When asked to compare their perception of education in China with that of the United States (Table 3), respondents tended to prefer U.S. education in terms of the use of student-centered learning, students asking questions in class, length of school days/schedules, class size, and the use of appropriate and effective classroom management. Such significant differences in perception of U.S. and Chinese education often clearly related to the challenges met by the U.S. volunteer educators during their service, frustrating a number of them in their aims of providing what they believed was more effective and meaningful educational experiences to the populations they served. These assertions can be further understood by referring to the participants’ responses to optional, open-ended questions of the survey.

The apparent lack of a culture or norms of student-centered learning in China set it apart from the United States in the eyes of the participants, contributing to the difficulties they experienced in their volunteer teaching ( $p=.000$ ). Almost all of them described this perceived difference as either “very challenging” or “slightly challenging” (Table 4). As one respondent commented in response to an optional open-ended question in the survey, Chinese education seemed “like a test-prep factory with little room for other types of learning strategies.” Many respondents described feeling “forced” to engage students in rote memorization exercises for test

preparation, which the volunteer educators understood as contradictory to what they perceived as “actual learning.” As another respondent wrote, “Trying to teach the test [was a challenge] when the test itself was inconsistent with learning goals.” Relatedly, many experienced a tension between their desire to teach students useful capabilities of language learning and the expectations of students and others around them to “teach to the test” in English language education. As one respondent expressed,

It's very difficult to strike a balance between helping my kids to succeed on their written exams (based on memorization of unnatural phrases) versus helping them succeed outside of classroom walls (grammar and speaking). I also have a very hard time introducing critical-thinking based projects in class -- this level of creation is extremely foreign to my students and, even with step-by-step guidance, few of them are currently able to complete the projects successfully.

As student-centered learning is normally connected in contemporary educational discourse to deemphasizing the authority of the teacher in place of students' a priori interests and goals (European Union 2010; Jackson 2014b), it is unsurprising in this context that most respondents relatedly observed that teachers in China are more well-respected in society ( $p=.000$ ) and have more authority in the classroom over students ( $p=.000$ ) in contrast to the United States (Table 3). In connection, respondents noted that students in China do not commonly ask questions in class as compared with students in the United States ( $p=.000$ ) wherein, according to a volunteer educator, “Teachers... encourage students to ask questions and think critically.” Additionally, the need to dress and appear professionally and use extensive customs and greetings in education settings were seen as more important in Chinese education than in their experience of that in the United States ( $p=.000$ ).

Many of the volunteer educators were likewise challenged by class sizes, further exacerbating their difficulties in using student-centered pedagogy. Although they varied in their perception of class size in U.S. settings (Table 3), almost 83% held that class sizes in Yunnan (where volunteers were spread out across the region) were a “very challenging” aspect of their work, with another 14% describing it as “slightly challenging” (Table 4). As one respondent noted, “My classes have between 45 and 55 kids, and it's very challenging to provide them with a student-centered education as well as implement effective management techniques.” As another put it, “The size of my classes (between 50-61 students) was/is hard to adapt to. It limits the degree to which I can build a relationship with each student and the amount of time I can spend practicing content with each of them.” Having to teach a large class size led one volunteer educator to reflect upon “why class size is fought over so much [in the United States],” alluding to enhanced understanding by the volunteer of the potential significance of class size in any country for impacting educational achievement and expectations.

Classroom management and discipline practices were held by all respondents, in both close-ended and open-ended sections of the questionnaire, as among the most challenging areas of cultural difference between U.S. and Chinese (Yunnan) educational settings overall, with 86% identifying this as a “very challenging” factor and another 14% describing it as “slightly challenging”. Though respondents varied in their perceptions of effective classroom management both in China and the United States (Table 3), they were nonetheless emphatic in their open-ended responses about the challenge that norms related to classroom management in Chinese education posed, particularly for their ability to manage their classrooms reasonably while facilitating the sort of open environment associated with student-centered learning. As one

participant wrote in response to the question of what the most challenging aspect of their work was,

Classroom management techniques and the perception of the teacher as an unquestionable authority figure. Because I didn't use force and didn't provide a strict presence from the beginning, my students' perception of me was forever distinct from the way they react to local teachers. No longer fearful, it became a daily challenge to motivate my most unmotivated, academically unsuccessful students to behave and follow instructions in class.

As another respondent put it, "local teachers often use corporal punishment, which I am unwilling and unable to do, taking away the most effective tool for classroom management."

Several other respondents in this study similarly noted that it was difficult to maintain classroom authority while not engaging in corporal punishment, which was commonly practiced in their Yunnan schools. Unable to adapt well to this cultural norm which raises ethical issues for volunteers who experienced education in the United States (where corporal punishment has been unpopular and in many states illegal for many decades), the volunteers' refusal or reluctance to participate in corporal punishment classroom techniques became deviant and therefore ineffective in contexts of Yunnan where this was a preferred practice.

Finally, the length of the class day in Yunnan, China was also a surprise and challenge to the U.S. educators (Table 3), with 59% of the participants expressing feeling very challenged while 41% were slightly challenged adapting to the longer schedule in Chinese schools (Table 4). Two volunteer educators regarded this as the single most challenging aspect of their work, with one respondent noting that "Students in Middle School are required to be awake at 6am and are in class until 9pm." For international educators coming from the United States, where the school day commonly ends in the early afternoon and most students finish extracurricular

activities by the early evening, this longer duration of time spent in Chinese schools seemed unnecessary and unproductive, given the overuse of examination prep pedagogy and “teaching to the test.”

### **Participant Satisfaction**

When asked to rate how satisfied they were with their international volunteer experience (Table 5), around 60% of the respondents were satisfied in terms of the quality of their work ( $p=.000$ ), their achievement of personal goals ( $p=.001$ ), and fulfillment of their responsibilities as volunteer educators ( $p=.002$ ). However, others felt ambivalent, and some were dissatisfied with their experience. Looking closely at their open-ended responses about their overall experiences of satisfaction, nearly all of their comments reflected a perceived tension between ideals and reality with regard to education’s impact within society, generally and/or in rural China, and/or within the context of international volunteer teaching.

In particular, some suggested that their views of education and its importance had grown over the course of their experience: “I think education is wonderful and powerful. I have more respect for educators everywhere, teaching should be the best-compensated profession.” Another noted similarly that, “I have stayed primarily out of a commitment to my students and my school, all the while knowing that in many respects I am not the high-quality teacher that my students need and deserve.” These comments suggest that these volunteers did not realize before their exchange how challenging teaching can or would be in general, which may reflect in part their relatively low-level of professional educational experience before entering the international education exchange program. On the other hand, this and related comments also suggest that the participants developed a sense of insecurity about their abilities as a result of their service, feeling less effective than they had hoped to be: As one respondent commented, “I know now I'm

not meant to be a teacher.” Given the differences all of the respondents identified between the educational settings they encountered in the United States and Yunnan, such a blanket assertion speaks to a high level of self-doubt and sense of personal inefficacy.

Others focused more on the tension between ideals and reality related to students’ needs versus policy-level and organizational-level discussion. One respondent claimed “an organization’s marketing plan...has an inverse relation to their actual commitment to improving education,” reflecting a cynical view of the development organization’s interest in self-preservation over long-term resolution of educational problems. Relatedly, others expressed a sense of existential crisis about being a good person and the roles they represented according to various framings of international volunteering and service work:

On a regular basis I struggle with and experience doubt about what exactly is the purpose of my being here (is it cultural exchange? mutual cultural exposure? filling a teaching gap? attempting to make fundamental change to existing mindsets? changing individual lives? being part of a bigger movement to change an educational system? is what we are doing "imperialist" and hopelessly western-centric? should I attempt to adapt to local mindsets and expectations or stick to my own convictions and push back against them?), whether my presence is having a net positive or negative effect on my students, whether, knowing what I know now, I would still choose to leave the comforts of my home country and society, not to mention friends and family, to do this work.

Similarly, another wrote, “The gap between good intentions and good results for those being helped was something that weighed on me throughout my time volunteering and which I think about still,” suggesting that an altruistic desire to help others was not satisfied through the exchange and service experience, despite the volunteer’s positive intentions and expectations.

Such comments demonstrates a clash between the volunteer educator's expectations and lived experiences, in line with previous research reporting the challenges associated with managing expectations in international volunteering and service work.

## **DISCUSSION**

Though traditionally volunteering, and particularly international volunteerism, have been associated firstly with contributing to disadvantaged communities, as Lough (2013), among others, has witnessed, the increased diversity of volunteer programs today provides for a wide array of outcomes despite similarities across programs' message statements. Seeing that increasing numbers of people wish to participate in volunteering experiences, programs capitalize on volunteering, through emphasizing its personal and social benefits, as they compete to recruit volunteers (Devereux 2008; McBride and Daftary 2005). Volunteers, meanwhile, tend to understand the field of international unpaid service or work in various ways, often simultaneously. As the field of international volunteerism and service increases in relation to global changes in understanding the needs of social capital and global citizenship, volunteers can be motivated by interests that can be characterized as altruism and social activism (Chow 2009; Lombas 2011; Zhou and Shang 2011; Chang et al. 2012; Nichols 2013), as "serious leisure," and/or as unpaid work (Desforges 2000; Jones 2011; Nichols 2013). These different understandings of their own roles along with their expectations on their service activities and responsibilities can confound the psychological contract of volunteers, in contrast to the usual mindset of those employees getting paid for the work they do (Nichols 2013).

This study confirms and illustrates that volunteers are indeed often motivated by varying factors, simultaneously, as study participants regarded making a difference and helping others, experiencing a challenge and becoming a better person, as well as travelling and gaining

practical career experience as important reasons for their service. In particular, altruism and “serious leisure” seemed to be major priorities for participants in this study, along with unpaid work, as 72% wanted to make a difference, while 90% wanted to become a better person and gain career experience. With traveling the world also emerging as a motivating factor for these participants, it is noticeable that a mix of altruistic, selfish, and work-related reasons was considered important when they joined an international volunteering and service program, further indicating that, being volunteers, as Nichols proposes, they would expect “greater autonomy” and “higher relational component” within their psychological contract (2013, p. 1001).

However, whether their hopes for the service they render are for altruism or personal gain, volunteers experience problems in the field often related to a mismatch between expectations and realities of international development work that can potentially stymie both goals. As Zhou and Chang (2011) note, even Chinese-origin volunteers may not understand sufficiently the nature of rural development and its challenges in order for them to interact productively in their placement sites in China. Imagining themselves as future super heroes in contexts wherein there are minimal physical developments and infrastructures, volunteers tend to overlook that educational and developmental challenges are often more related to culture than running water (Lombas 2011; Cook 2012). In culturally distant contexts, international volunteers may additionally develop negative overall attitudes towards volunteering, education, and development even if large-scale reports also identify that many gain from such experiences, including more objective perspectives, flexible work habits, and related transnational labor skills (Zhou and Chang 2011; Cook 2012; Jackson 2014a). These volunteers may be disturbed by what they find, seeing cultural differences in an exaggerated way, by focusing on what sets the “self”

apart from the “other,” rather than what they have in common (Chang et al. 2012; Martin and Griffiths 2013).

In this study, participants tended to focus on cultural differences rather than any possible similarities, identifying educational differences as the most significant sources of challenge to their service, rather than physical, infrastructural, or related possible hindrances. As seen in the study of Lough et al. (2009), among others (Zhou and Shang 2011; Mezirow 1985; Martin and Griffiths 2013), these challenges primarily arise from cultural expectations and issues of cultural adaptation as volunteers felt unprepared, by training and past experience, to work in a culturally competent way in unfamiliar contexts. In particular the following major differences became apparent:

First, there was seemingly a lack of student-centered learning in Yunnan when compared with the United States. Due to large class sizes, student-centered learning was made impossible in many cases, as volunteers often had to teach 50 to 70 students in their classes. Students were also less likely to play an active role in their learning, such as by asking questions in class. “Teaching to the test” through rote memorization seemed, instead, to be the preferred practice by local counterparts (and was expected from the students and their families), hindering the volunteers to teach students of what they believed to be the most important aspects of language learning for practical, everyday life.

Second, there was a stark contrast observed in classroom management and discipline practices between Yunnan and U.S. educational settings. Because the volunteers did not participate in corporal punishment as was commonly practiced in Yunnan, they found themselves less effective amongst counterparts, who taught using fear and moralizing. They thus experienced difficulties gaining respect and controlling large classes, over long school days,

when children saw them as different and unwilling to manage the class in culturally normal ways.

Third (and related to the first two points), there was an apparent high regard for teachers in Yunnan than in U.S. contexts. Volunteers noticed that, in Yunnan, teachers had a lot of authority in the classroom over students and were well-respected in society. Customs, manners, and greetings were likewise important in the school settings. However, seen within a schema wherein student-centered learning is sacrificed for a forced “test factory” environment, these positive differences of Chinese education were of little consequence to volunteers in comparison to the difficulties they expressed encountering in relation to teaching for active learning, critical thinking, and the everyday use of knowledge and information.

Such perceived differences do not only reflect a continuous need but also reaffirm previous findings that international volunteers require better training (before and during service), not merely to see themselves as a new segment of unpaid international labor (Jones 2011), but as cultural workers in dynamic, political post-colonial spaces (Martin and Griffiths 2013; Jackson 2014a). Volunteers, accordingly, require intercultural competencies, including abilities to do critical reflection, among others, not only to determine what actions are appropriate in given contexts but to also understand exactly how and why the “self” symbolically interacts with the “other” in the context of international volunteer service work (Mezirow 1985; Martin and Griffiths 2013).

This requisite for trainings to create spaces for intercultural conversation -- for volunteers to understand their position within cultural and political global contexts -- is further evidenced by the manner by which the study participants grappled with different senses of satisfaction they gained and had hoped to gain from their volunteer service. Although most volunteers felt

satisfied in fulfilling their requirements related to work, personal development, and professional responsibilities, there were others, as seen in previous surveys, who grappled directly with the discourse of American post-colonial soft power as they experienced various cultural and professional challenges (Brav et al. 2002; Lombas 2011). Even if participants' expressions of inefficacy and insecurity in teaching can be seen as echoes of Chang et al.'s (2012) observation of volunteers developing more objective understandings through their service (particularly as most participants lacked much teaching experience beforehand), such expressions also speak of the challenges volunteers encounter personally with regard to competing discourses and framing of international volunteerism and development at the large-scale level.

For example, many participants clearly linked discourses of personal inefficacy with a mismatch or possibly contradictory missions of their development organization, as observed by Jackson (2014a). They specifically contrasted "an organization's mission plan [to] improving education"; and identified multiple missions they struggled to recognize and appreciate in dramatic tones: "cultural exchange? mutual cultural exposure? filling a teaching gap? attempting to make fundamental changes to existing mindsets?" Good intentions versus good results contrasted in many participants' minds, demonstrating that volunteers are hardly dupes to international or national priorities which may require critical post-colonial thinking, but should rather be seen as active participants and producers of contrasting and diverse framings of the field, from altruism and Samaritanism to unpaid global labor and beyond.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Similar to past studies conducted on international volunteers both generally and within China, this study has found that mismatches of expectations with realities and a lack of cultural competency can hinder volunteers in performing their work, and in perceiving it as beneficial

both to themselves and to the communities. These challenges can impair international volunteers as positive cross-national ambassadors, causing stress to the volunteers and negatively impacting their view of their host community. In this case, as in others, challenges may relate in part to a lack of training, appropriate site placement, and psychological contract that is quite distinct among volunteers as unpaid workers.

The biggest challenges participants identified in this study related to cultural differences in education, the work field of the volunteers, between the United States and Yunnan, China. These differences included a perceived common lack of student-centered learning in Chinese educational culture in comparison with that of the United States, and the related frequent use of test preparation and rote memorization strategies. Volunteers working in such environments in Yunnan felt hindered from teaching what they viewed as more valuable and useful knowledge to students, due to the prevalent contextual value system attached to exam preparation and performance. Class size exacerbated challenges related to encouraging student-centered learning for many volunteers, as did the culture of students themselves, who were notably different from their U.S. counterparts in the eyes of the participants in their rarely or never asking questions in class. Developing critical thinking and active learning among students was held as a pipedream by many volunteer educators in this context. The prevalence of corporal punishment created a further hindrance to many of the volunteers who, raised in the U.S. educational system, would not support such negative punishments to learners, and therefore were rendered ineffective within an educational system that seemed to prize this technique.

Given these differences perceived by the volunteers, volunteers were mixed in their views of their own impact and success. Many reflected that they had not realized how challenging teaching would be or what the nature of the challenges would be, with one noting

that they may not have gone to Yunnan at all, if they “knew then” what they “knew now.” Some level of increased awareness along these lines is no doubt inevitable, and has been seen in past studies (Chang et al. 2012). However, the relatively high degree of pessimism and cynicism seen in some of the participants’ comments to open-ended survey questions are hardly of benefit to the parties involved in such educational exchange programs, reflecting glaring differences in educational culture between the two societies, and a substantial mismatch between volunteer expectations about rural educational development in China and cultural and other realities.

These findings confirm and further elaborate upon recent research findings that international development volunteers need structured assistance for developing skills, such as critical reflection, among others, for transnational and in particular post-colonial understanding. Such training should be informed by and respond to the volunteers’ diverse understandings of the contemporary field of international volunteerism and service, their interrelated psychological contract and motivations to serve, as well as to prior observations regarding cultural difference and culture shock volunteers typically experience within specific transnational contexts, as can be seen through case studies into specific cultures and regions of cross-cultural and cross-national exchange. As Martin and Griffith’s note (2013), international volunteerism cannot be held simplistically by volunteers as unpaid transnational work but must be regarded more fully as “intercultural conversation” (2013), in order for volunteers to transform themselves and their communities of service fruitfully instead of developing ethnocentric or other skeptical ideas in the face of fuzzy and complex post-colonial cultural development issues.

Relatedly, these findings have implications more specifically for the understanding of cultural differences in education between the United States and China and particularly for those researchers and practitioners interested in enhancing educational understanding for cross-

national exchange between the two societies. Such findings related to volunteer perceptions of cultural differences between the United States and China can also inform more honest and effective, sustainable recruitment by programs sponsoring U.S. educational volunteers in China, in order to reduce the mismatch between volunteer expectations and realities in the future. Such knowledge can assist potential volunteers to make more informed decisions related to volunteer service, and enhance the ability of organizations to retain those volunteers recruited. It can also inform the administration of existing and future exchange organizations, particularly in their work to identify sites for and to train and select volunteer educators. Through enhancing the work of such organizations, bridging cultures can become stronger and more permanent features that cross the divide between the United States and China, increasing mutual understanding rather than alienating these societies from each other.

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**Table 1. Characteristics of Study Respondents (n=29)**

<b>Characteristics</b>		<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Age</b> (in Mean $\pm$ SD years)*	23.59 $\pm$ 1.08	.990
<b>Sex</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Male	9 (31.0%)	.063
Female	20 (69.0%)	
<b>Ethnicity</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
White/Caucasian	18 (62.1%)	.000
Black/African	1 ( 3.4%)	
Asian/Asian American	5 (17.2%)	
Mixed Race/Descent	5 (17.2%)	
<b>Length of Service</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
More than 6 months	1 ( 3.4%)	.000
At least 12 months	3 (10.3%)	
At least 18 months	9 (31.0%)	
At least 24 months	15 (51.7%)	
More than 24 months	1 ( 3.4%)	
<b>Age Group Taught</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Primary Education	10 (34.5%)	.122
Secondary Education	14 (48.3%)	
Primary & Secondary Education	5 (17.2%)	
<b>Work Site Description</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Lacking infrastructure	10 (34.5%)	.137
At least with adequate infrastructure	19 (65.5%)	
<b>Undergraduate Degree in Education</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	27 (93.1%)	.000
With	2 ( 6.9%)	
<b>Teacher Certification</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	27 (93.1%)	.000
With	2 ( 6.9%)	
<b>Teaching Experience</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	27 (93.1%)	.000
With	2 ( 6.9%)	
<b>TESOL/TEFL</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	12 (41.4%)	.458
With	17 (58.6%)	
<b>Previously Taught English as Foreign Language</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	23 (79.3%)	.003
With	6 (20.7%)	
<b>Travel Experience</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Travelled throughout USA/International	4 (13.8%)	.001
Long trips abroad before	6 (20.7%)	
Lived/worked abroad	19 (65.5%)	
<b>Familiarity through University Study</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	12 (41.4%)	.458
With	17 (58.6%)	

<b>Familiarity through Volunteer Organization</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	12 (41.4%)	.458
With	17 (58.6%)	
<b>Familiarity through Cultural Exposure</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	25 (86.2%)	.000
With	4 (13.8%)	
<b>Familiarity through Self-Directed Research</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Without	24 (82.8%)	.001
With	5 (17.2%)	
<b>Local Language Mastery</b> (by frequency and percent distribution)		
Fluent/nearly fluent	4 (13.8%)	.078
Highly functional	9 (31.0%)	
Functional	10 (34.5%)	
Minimal	4 (13.8%)	
Poor	2 (06.9%)	

\* two missing data replaced by estimation using linear trend at point

**Table 2. Respondents' Motivation to Volunteer in an International Organization (n=29)**

<b>Reason/Factor</b>	<b>Not at all important</b>	<b>A little Important</b>	<b>Important</b>	<b>Most important</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Travel and see different parts of the world	0 (0.0%)	4 (13.8%)	21 (72.4%)	4 (13.8%)	.000*
Make a difference and help other people	0 (0.0%)	2 (6.9%)	6 (20.3%)	21 (72.4%)	.000*
Experience a challenge and achieve something extraordinary	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.4%)	10 (34.5)	18 (62.1%)	.001*
To better myself and grow as a person	0 (0.0%)	3 (10.3%)	13 (44.8%)	13 (44.8%)	.032*
Gain practical career experience or skills	0 (0.0%)	6 (20.7%)	17 (58.6)	6 (20.7%)	.015*
Escape the demands of my ordinary life	14 (48.7%)	11 (37.9%)	3 (10.3%)	1 (3.4%)	.001*
Take a break from reality or avoid unemployment	13 (44.8%)	13 (44.8%)	2 (6.9%)	1 (3.4%)	.000*

\*statistically significant difference at 0.05

**Table 3. Respondents' Perceptions on Country of Service and Home Country (n=29)**

<b>Educational Norms</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>USA</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Teachers have a lot of authority in the classroom over students.	4.38 ± 0.86	3.83 ± 0.54	.000*
Teachers are well-respected in society.	4.17 ± 0.71	2.72 ± 0.84	.000*
Student-centered learning is a common strategy.	1.76 ± 0.58	3.86 ± 0.52	.000*
Teachers have freedom/autonomy from parents, principals, and other stakeholders.	2.76 ± 1.15	2.55 ± 0.99	.553
Normal classroom management and discipline practices are appropriate and effective.	2.48 ± 0.95	3.45 ± 0.69	.000*
Teachers are regularly involved with moral/religious education.	2.69 ± 1.39	2.79 ± 0.73	.702
Customs, greetings, and manners are important in school settings.	4.14 ± 0.79	3.14 ± 0.92	.000*
Professional dress and appearance is important in school settings.	2.90 ± 0.98	3.76 ± 0.83	.001*
Students often ask questions in the classroom.	1.93 ± 0.80	3.93 ± 0.70	.000*
Typical class sizes are not too large.	1.52 ± 0.83	3.34 ± 0.86	.000*
School days/class schedules are long.	4.79 ± 0.41	2.45 ± 0.74	.000*

1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-neutral; 4-agree; 5-strongly agree

\*statistically significant difference at 0.05

**Table 4. Challenges Experienced during Volunteer Service by Respondents (n=29)**

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>	<b>Not challenging</b>	<b>Slightly challenging</b>	<b>Very challenging</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Amount of authority teachers have over students	1 (3.4%)	5 (17.2%)	18 (62.1%)	5 (17.2%)	.000*
Amount of respect teachers are given in society	1 (3.4%)	24 (82.8%)	4 (13.8%)	0 (0.0%)	.000*
Amount of student-centered learning in schools	1 (3.4%)	3 (10.3%)	11 (37.9%)	14 (48.3%)	.001*
Amount of freedom/autonomy teachers have	2 (6.9%)	9 (31.0%)	11 (37.9%)	7 (24.1%)	.104
Classroom management and discipline practices	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)	.000*
Teacher's involvement in moral/religious education	9 (31.0%)	11 (37.9%)	8 (27.6%)	1 (3.4%)	.050
Importance of customs, manners, and greetings	2 (6.9%)	15 (51.7%)	12 (41.4%)	0 (0.0%)	.008*
Importance of professional appearance in school settings	4 (13.8%)	23 (79.3%)	2 (6.9%)	0 (0.0%)	.000*
Amount of questions students ask	1 (3.4%)	8 (27.6%)	14 (48.3)	6 (20.7%)	.008*
Size of classes	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.4%)	4 (13.8%)	24 (82.8%)	.000*
Length of school days	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	12 (41.4%)	17 (58.6%)	.458

\*statistically significant difference at 0.05

**Table 5. Respondents' Level Satisfaction on Volunteer Experience (n=29)**

<b>Area of Satisfaction</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
I am satisfied with the quality of my work.	0 (0.0%)	6 (20.7%)	4 (13.8%)	17 (58.6%)	2 (6.9%)	.000*
I achieve my personal goals.	0 (0.0%)	3 (10.3%)	8 (27.6%)	16 (55.2%)	2 (6.9%)	.001*
I fulfilled my responsibilities.	0 (0.0%)	5 (17.2%)	5 (17.2%)	16 (55.2%)	3 (10.3%)	.002*

\*statistically significant difference at 0.05