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IRVINE

Volunteerism and the Legitimation of Inequality in Contemporary China

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Henry Chiu Hail

Dissertation Committee:  
Associate Professor Yang Su, Chair  
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2016



## **DEDICATION**

To

My mother, Mei Oi Hail, who is dearly missed.

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# CURRICULUM VITAE

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# **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Volunteerism and the Legitimation of Inequality in Contemporary China

By

Henry Chiu Hail

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Professor Yang Su, Chair

As economic inequality and the rural-urban education gap in China have rapidly increased since the Reform and Opening, so too have the number of Chinese volunteer organizations. How does volunteerism in China reflect and influence Chinese urbanites' perceptions of inequality? To answer this question, I conducted participant observation with several Chinese volunteer organizations over the course of one year. I also conducted in-depth interviews with former and current volunteers and organizational staff. I found that many Chinese volunteers perceive economic inequality as normal, but are concerned that lack of understanding between the rich and poor could lead to social conflict. These volunteers explicitly profess egalitarianism, yet construct narratives which implicitly attribute inequality to individual and cultural differences. They draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and the rural poor by creating narratives which portray poor rural people as lacking the ability to make autonomous, rational decisions. Moreover, volunteer organizations develop styles of talk which discourage volunteers from recognizing structural sources of inequality. I argue that volunteers' discourses can legitimate inequality and reinforce prejudice toward disadvantaged groups. Privileged people exercise agency in developing new ways to legitimate inequality in response to changing contradictions associated with capitalism. However, they draw upon widely-accepted master narratives to construct these legitimations.



## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study addresses the following questions: Do Chinese urbanites care about inequality? Why do they care or not care about inequality? How do they maintain their own attitudes toward inequality?

In regard to the first question, survey data seems to indicate that Chinese urbanites indeed care about inequality (Whyte 2010; Pew Research Center 2012). In fact, Chinese urbanites care more about inequality than rural residents (Wang 2010; Whyte 2010). However, there is often a gap between what people say and what they really think, as well as a gap between what people say and what they do. Moreover, survey data is often inadequate for ascertaining subjects' subconscious assumptions, attitudes and motives. Thus, I use both in-depth interviews and ethnography to ascertain my respondents' attitudes toward inequality. Specifically, I analyze how upper-class respondents talk about inequality during interviews, and I observe how they situate themselves in relation to poor people and interact with poor people while acting as volunteers. By constantly comparing what they say in different contexts, and what they say to what they do, I am able to reveal a more accurate assessment of my subjects' attitudes toward inequality.

There are many ways to address the second question, which asks why Chinese urbanites care or do not care about inequality. A full understanding of the causes of people's attitudes requires a thorough understanding of the historical and biographical conditions which shape their subjective experience. In this particular study, I describe how narratives told by the Chinese media, education system, government, and other institutions inform my respondents' attitudes toward inequality. I also describe how my respondents' social backgrounds shape their attitudes toward inequality.

The bulk of this study addresses the third question, which asks how Chinese urbanites maintain their own attitudes toward inequality. I observe how people's practices influence their perceptions. I analyze the ways in which upper-class people make their perspectives on inequality believable to themselves. I primarily analyze what they do with their talk: how they construct narratives and enforce

styles of talk which produce either concern or indifference toward inequality. I examine how my respondents construct narratives in the course of interviews, but also how they use narrative and other framing practices during their interactions with other volunteers and with poor, rural people. I also examine how volunteers enforce a particular style of talk among volunteers, which shapes volunteers' perceptions and limits the scope of discussion.

The Chinese young adults whom I studied are not representative of Chinese people as a whole. When I draw conclusions about "Chinese urbanites," I am mainly referring to middle-class and upper-class young adults in their 20s. This is a group with considerable economic, political and social resources. Hence, this is the group of Chinese urbanites who may be in the best position to effect social change, should they choose to. Moreover, I chose to study a particular subgroup of young Chinese urbanites: those who chose to volunteer in the countryside. One might expect this subgroup to be more aware of rural-urban inequality, more concerned about inequality, and more altruistic than their peers who did not choose to volunteer. Thus, if even those urbanites with volunteer experience do not really care about reducing inequality, there is little chance that most other privileged urbanites care either.

I argue that young middle-class and upper-class Chinese urbanites are not opposed to economic inequality. They are concerned about social conflict and some worry about rising prices, but they fundamentally accept economic inequality as normal. To some degree, they also accept the unequal distribution of educational and economic opportunities. To put things another way, most urban Chinese young adults believe they have the right to be wealthy and spend money the way they want, even if this requires other people to make do with much less.

Secondly, I argue that privileged people construct narratives which (a) attribute economic success to individual and cultural characteristics, and (b) obscure structural inequality and inequality of opportunity. Specifically, volunteers use narratives to ascribe different groups of people with different levels of personal autonomy. In this study, I define autonomy as an individual's ability to make independent, informed, rational decisions which are free from coercion and are not restrained by social

norms. Volunteers believe that autonomous people make better decisions and are therefore, generally speaking, more economically successful than people who lack autonomy. Rather than view autonomy as structurally determined, volunteers perceive autonomy as a personality characteristic and cultural characteristic which varies between individuals and regions.

Most volunteers, when asked, will acknowledge that opportunities are not equally distributed. However, they are not particularly upset by this fact. Volunteers in educational NGOs claim that teaching poor rural people autonomy can provide them with happiness and “meaning,” even if they remain in poverty. They do not always blame poor people for their poverty, but to a large extent they deny that material inequality is in itself a problem which must be resolved. Volunteers’ primary goal alternates between inspiring poor people to achieve more and teaching poor people to be satisfied with less. Thus, volunteers believe that autonomy, as a personal characteristic, is the key to helping rural people to either escape or transcend poverty.

Finally, I argue that upper-class Chinese people draw upon two main master narratives to legitimate inequality. The first of these master narratives claims that innovation led by elites will improve life for everyone. The second master narrative describes the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and maintains that it is China’s destiny to reclaim and surpass its historical prosperity and glory. Most people are not conscious of the fact that they construct narratives which reproduce their attitudes toward inequality. Nonetheless, they construct narratives to interpret their experiences, and often draw upon the same few narratives which appear to serve their interests and are widely acknowledged as legitimate.

### **The Background of this Study**

In the summer of 2011, an academic conference was jointly organized by the sociology departments of a Chinese university and an American university. In a keynote speech, a highly esteemed American sociologist warned the mostly Chinese audience that massive wealth inequality and unemployment were major contributors to the Arab Spring uprisings. He then showed evidence of rapidly rising inequality in contemporary China. Only by instituting democratic reforms, he claimed, could the

Chinese government successfully channel popular dissent, an inevitable outcome of rising inequality, toward peaceful ends.

Most of my Chinese acquaintances scoffed at the idea that democracy would help stabilize China. On the contrary, they said, if China were to institute democratic reforms then Western powers would inevitably use democratic channels to divide and conquer China. When asked about rising inequality, they acknowledged that this could pose a problem to social stability, but they also insisted that inequality was necessary for economic growth. The important thing, they maintained, was that the overall wealth of the country kept growing, as this would maximize benefits for all. I asked whether something should be done to help China's poorest citizens. Several claimed that no one in China could really be considered poor, as everyone had clothes to wear and food to eat. A few claimed that rural people lived much better lives than urbanites, as rural people had large houses, clean air, and could rent out their houses to urban tourists. Some acknowledged that poverty was a problem, but said that China was developing quickly and poverty would soon be a thing of the past. Several cynically claimed that inequality in China would always exist due to selfishness and a "slave mentality" endemic to the Chinese psyche.

One might assume that educated young citizens of a nominally socialist country would see extreme wealth inequality as inherently problematic. Instead, many appear to see China's staggering level of inequality as relatively normal and acceptable. Moreover, class discrimination is ubiquitous. While walking in front of Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University, I noticed a truck with Chinese characters written into the dust on its side, reading, "Farmers, when you come to our city, please have some manners!" While walking through the halls of People's University, famed for producing many of China's top leaders, an acquaintance who was a student there pointed to a framed picture of a tanned Mao Zedong standing in tall grass and disdainfully remarked that he looked like a "country bandit." I witnessed Beijing residents openly complain about migrant workers while glaring at the migrant workers sitting directly across from them on the bus. Most city residents did not seem to hide their prejudice toward rural people.

Thus, while walking through a university building in Shanghai with a Chinese student, I was surprised to see a poster with several pictures of smiling, light-skinned Chinese college students posing with their arms around heavily-tanned young Chinese children in front of rural houses and stacks of wheat. I asked my colleague about the poster and he explained to me that many Chinese college students volunteer to teach at rural schools, some for years at a time. Who were these Chinese young people, I wondered, who would give up the comforts of city life to teach in the countryside? Was I wrong in assuming that most Chinese young people didn't care about inequality? I later encountered a Taiwanese friend who had spent time volunteering in central China. She told me that her Chinese co-volunteers often talked about how to live meaningful lives and were looking for alternatives to the typical career tracks pushed on them by their parents. I asked whether it would be possible for me to learn more about these volunteers and volunteer programs. She told me that they would probably be happy to recruit a foreigner such as myself. I eventually decided to conduct an ethnography of China's volunteer teachers. By observing how privileged Chinese volunteers from large cities interacted with rural people living in poverty, I hoped to learn how volunteerism reflected, as well as shaped, urban Chinese young adults' beliefs about inequality and the poor.

According to survey data, the vast majority of Chinese citizens believe that national inequality is too high (White 2010) and is a serious problem (Pew Research Center 2012). On the other hand, three quarters of Chinese citizens also believe that a free market economy is better for most people, even if it means that some people will be rich and others will be poor (Simmons 2014). More than half of Chinese citizens oppose the redistribution of wealth (Whyte 2010). Furthermore, while most Chinese people believe that opportunities are unequally distributed, the majority also believe that hard-working and talented individuals will find ways to succeed (Whyte 2010). Thus, even though Chinese citizens appear concerned about rising inequality, most appear to believe that success is a result of merit.

Even if many Chinese believe that inequality is a problem, it has not destroyed their optimism about the future. A recent survey suggests that Chinese citizens are, by far, the most optimistic people in

the world (Dahlgreen 2016). Nearly nine out of ten believe the younger generation will be better off than their parents and say things are going well in the economy (Simmons 2014). Moreover, Chinese people report higher than ever levels of happiness (Liu, Xiong and Su 2012). The fact that most Chinese people have gained wealth in the past several decades (Whyte 2010) helps explain their support for marketization and their general optimism about their individual and national futures. Furthermore, since much of China's inequality is explained by differences between the average incomes of different geographic regions and work units, rather than inequality within these categories, inequality may not feel personally upsetting to most Chinese (Wang 2008).

These studies appear to show that even though most Chinese citizens think that inequality is a serious problem, they oppose redistribution and are optimistic about the future. Survey data is often insufficient for uncovering respondents' true attitudes, however, as they may simply state socially acceptable answers. Moreover, even if respondents truly believe that inequality is a problem, these surveys do not show why Chinese citizens think inequality is a problem or what they want to be done about it. If Chinese only think inequality is a problem when it results from corruption, for instance, then they may support anti-corruption measures even as they oppose redistribution. If Chinese are primarily concerned about inequality because it foments social instability, they may support increased public security rather than social welfare.

Furthermore, these studies do not show the cultural processes by which inequality and market competition have become normalized. How do citizens of a formally communist society come to embrace the market and think of massive wealth inequality as "just the way things are"? In a country which once witnessed history's largest communist revolution, why do so many look at rising inequality and claim, "there's nothing that can be done"? And in a country where a small elite control much of the wealth, why are the vast majority of people optimistic about the future?

Some suggest that the legitimation of inequality is facilitated by symbolic status hierarchies and discourses which conceal underlying power relations (for ex. Lamont and Molnár 2002). Scholars

disagree, however, on both the nature and source of these status hierarchies and discourses. Some describe quality (*suzhi*) discourse as a stand-in for labor value and class. These scholars tend to portray status hierarchies as cultural institutions which arise from and correspond to capitalist market institutions (Anagnost 1997; Yan 2003; Hanser 2008). Others show that quality discourse is polysemous. These scholars tend to emphasize the role of human agents and cultural and discursive resources, rather than economic institutions, in creating and shaping status hierarchies (Fong 2007; Hsu 2007).

Volunteerism presents a particularly useful case to study the role of agency in constructing symbolic status hierarchies because, in contrast to retail stores, karaoke halls, hotels, factories and job fairs, all of which have been the sites of numerous ethnographies in China, volunteerism is not intrinsically related to the market economy. Thus, volunteerism provides a unique window into the agency of privileged actors in shaping the values, norms and boundaries of a post-socialist society. Moreover, volunteers can choose how they situate themselves in relation to the disadvantaged groups whom they alternately claim to “help,” “serve” or “collaborate with.”

This study attempts to answer the following empirical questions: Why do some young Chinese urbanites choose to volunteer? How do these Chinese volunteers perceive and talk about inequality? How do they situate themselves in relation to disadvantaged groups? And finally, what are they doing about inequality? I emphasize how respondents talk about inequality because narratives and styles of talk often shape perception and action. However, in order to more critically analyze their talk, I compare how they talk about inequality in different situations, and I compare how they talk to what they do.

More broadly, I ask how inequality is legitimated and new symbolic status hierarchies are constructed in a post-socialist society where commerce, communication, and migration is increasingly transnational. I found that privileged young adults are not simply *taught* how to assume privilege as a right and style, but are also active agents in the construction of their own emerging cultures of privilege. They do this by constructing narratives and styles of talk which valorize their individualistic ambitions as reflective of their superior personal qualities as well as beneficial to society. Specifically, volunteers

frame themselves as more autonomous, rational, and innovative than their peers and the rural poor, and claim that people like themselves are the vanguards of progress in China. Drawing upon these findings, I argue that actors construct legitimations of inequality by drawing upon discourses and idealized models from both within their country and also from those foreign countries which they deem “developed.” Specifically, these actors construct a specific conception of individual agency which supports neoliberalism and legitimates inequality.

My study bridges structuralist and constructionist perspectives by showing how social position helps shape one’s propensity to identify with particular symbolic boundaries as well as one’s ability to participate in the construction of new symbolic boundaries. I show that possession of an abundant amount of a particular dimension of capital can lead the possessor to subjectively disidentify with that dimension of capital. As an example of how this can take place, there is evidence that most Christian ascetics have historically come from the upper class (Stark 2003). In China, the well-known environmental activist Dai Qing comes from a family of high-ranking Communist Party and military officials (Topping 1998). Moreover, building upon Bourdieu’s theory of *misrecognition* (1996), I show how new forms of privilege, which often dramatically burst forth in post-socialist societies, lead the privileged to devise new symbolic boundaries which obscure the sources of their privilege.

Building upon the work of world society scholars (Meyer, Boli, Thomas and Ramirez 1997; Meyer and Jepperson 2000; Frank and Meyer 2002), I show how social status in China is increasingly linked to perceived qualities of autonomy, rationality, self-knowledge and creativity rather than traditional markers of human capital such as educational or professional credentials. In other words, social status in China is increasingly linked to perceptions of one’s level of individual agency. Young Chinese urban elites use Western-inspired volunteerism to build their own identities as capable adults, as well as to promote a symbolic status hierarchy based on level of individual agency, particularly the ability to make autonomous decisions. These processes of identity-building and symbolic status hierarchy construction



come at the expense of the rural poor, who are framed as the perpetual “other” to the enlightened volunteers.

In this first chapter I describe the state of inequality in China, particularly inequality between rural and urban citizens. I also review recent research on Chinese perceptions of inequality and compare how various scholars theorize change in contemporary Chinese society’s symbolic status hierarchies. I explain my own contribution to the literature on the legitimation of inequality in China and elsewhere, and how I will use narrative theory (Polletta 1998, 2006) to analyze volunteers’ agency in constructing symbolic boundaries which legitimate inequality. Finally, I briefly describe my data collection methods.

In the second chapter, I analyze volunteers’ narratives about how they became volunteers and show how these narratives legitimate their privilege. I analyze these narratives not as objective accounts, but as stories which volunteers use to develop their identities and draw distinctions between themselves and their peers. I show how volunteers’ individualist narratives about becoming volunteers obscures the social roots of their privilege, and ultimately equip them to maintain their privilege. I also explain how volunteers’ privileged backgrounds facilitated their dissatisfaction with established institutions and made volunteerism an attractive choice.

In the third chapter, I analyze how volunteer organizations create collective identities and *styles of talk* (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) which valorize ignoring structural inequality. I also show how volunteers’ implicitly draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and the rural poor, even as they profess egalitarianism. Moreover, I show how volunteers use styles of talk to hide the contradictions in volunteer discourse and action.

In the fourth chapter, I show how volunteers maintain symbolic boundaries and legitimate inequality by invalidating the perspectives and decisions of rural people. When rural people disagree with volunteers, volunteers attribute their disagreement to their inability to make autonomous, rational decisions. Volunteers’ narratives about how rural people make decisions and the consequences of their decisions deny rural people’s agency while justifying volunteers’ authority.

In the fifth chapter, I show how volunteers downplay the importance of structural inequality by constructing optimistic narratives which portray a continuously rising China where life is improving for everyone. This optimism is rooted in narratives about volunteerism, entrepreneurship, innovation, and technological progress. The protagonists in these narratives are transnational Chinese elites with whom my respondents feel close affinity.

In the sixth chapter, I describe volunteers' general perceptions of economic inequality. I show that they see inequality as normal and functional, but are also worried that inequality could lead to social conflict.

### **Inequality in Contemporary China**

Although inequality has drastically increased since the “reform and opening” initiated by President Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, the patterns evident within China's contemporary inequality have roots in the “boundaries and categories” (Wang 2008) created by the Maoist state. Inequality of opportunity for citizens of various regional and political backgrounds are enforced and reproduced through both formal and informal processes.

In the United States, race is one of the most significant predictors of wealth and income (Conley 1999), while region is relatively insignificant (Wang 2008). In China, however, province of residence and household registration status are the most significant categories explaining inequality (Wang 2008). The gap between rural and urban people in contemporary China takes both objective and subjective forms. Economically, the rural-urban gap continues to rise. China's income inequality has a Gini coefficient of .53, in comparison to .45 in the United States (Xie and Zhou 2014). The rural-urban income gap accounts for about one half of the total increase in inequality since 1985 (Wang 2010: 223).

Inequality of opportunity for citizens of various regional backgrounds are enforced and reproduced through both formal and informal processes. Among these are laws which limit within-country migration (Solinger 1999; Wang 2008), region-based hiring discrimination (Huang, Guo, and Tang 2010), ethnicity-based hiring discrimination, which is more common in private firms than public firms (Maurer-Fazio 2012), differential policing based on regional background and household registration

status (Han 2010), region-based university admissions quotas which favor residents of large cities (Fu 2013), and the vast array of differential benefits, including education (Chen and Yang 2010), housing, health care and pensions, assigned on the basis of one's household registration certificate and work unit (Solinger 1999; Wang 2008). There is also a strong relationship between region and educational attainment (Hannum, An, and Cherng 2011; Dong and Wan 2012; Li et al. 2013, Yeung 2013).

China's household registration system (the *hukou* system) continues to impose barriers upon rural people. Every citizen of China is assigned an official place of residence at birth, typically based upon their parents' official residence. Rural children accompanying their parents to cities are usually not able to attend public schools in the city, or face many obstacles in trying to do so (Chen and Yang 2010; Liang and Chen 2007). Even those who are allowed into city schools are usually required to return to their place of origin to take the college entrance exam, which varies from province to province (Yeung 2013). It is widely believed that the college entrance exam in large cities is far easier than the exam given to provincial students. Moreover, top universities continue to impose quotas which restrict the number of students from each province (Fu 2013), a process which greatly favors students from a few large Chinese cities. Students of high socioeconomic status also benefit from elite universities' reliance on "recommendation letters" from select high schools, also known as "keypoint schools." Only elite high schools are allowed to issue these official student recommendations, which guarantee those students entry to university without taking the college entrance exam (Liu et al. 2014). Migrants from rural areas are also barred from many city jobs, denied benefits by employers, and disproportionately harassed by *chengguan*, the city management police (Zhan 2011; Han 2010).

### **Attitudes toward Inequality**

Partly due to political restrictions, there are virtually no surveys which measure Chinese citizens' opinions on specific policies. However, several studies investigate Chinese citizens' attitudes toward inequality in general. About 70% of Chinese believe that the national income gap is too large, but only 32% believe that the income gap within their own neighborhood is too large (Whyte 2010: 44). Like

Americans, Chinese think the government should do more to help the poor but do not support higher taxes on the rich. In stark contrast to the support for government redistribution evident in most Eastern European post-socialist countries, only about a third of Chinese believe the government should redistribute wealth to meet people's needs (Whyte 2010: 51). Like Americans, Chinese show broad tolerance for inequality of income and for the familial transmission of wealth across generations (Longoria 2009; Whyte 2010). Less than a third of Chinese blame poverty on unequal opportunity or an unfair economic structure. However, about 57% of Chinese feel the government should do something to reduce the gap between rich and poor, and 76% believe the government should ensure jobs for everyone willing to work. Martin Whyte notes that survey results suggest that most Chinese support "a market-oriented welfare state, not a socialist society" (52).

A belief in meritocracy, coupled with the idea that inequality is necessary for development, may lead most Chinese to tolerate current levels of inequality, at least for the time being. Chinese citizens are almost twice as likely as Americans to say that people are poor because they lack ability and half as likely as Americans to blame poverty on the economic structure (Whyte 2010: 73). Only 28 percent of Chinese, compared to 33 percent of Americans, believe that unequal opportunity is an important cause of poverty. About half of Chinese agree with the statement that "only when income differences are large enough will individuals have the incentive to work hard," compared with less than 20 percent who disagree with that statement (Whyte 2010: 53). Furthermore, most Chinese believe that economic development and income inequality are positively related and typically ascribe high levels of inequality to countries they perceive as more developed (Xie et al. 2012). About 61 percent of Chinese believe that the proportion of rich people in China will increase, while only 26 percent believe that the proportion of poor will increase (Whyte 2010: 45). Thus, most Chinese appear willing to tolerate a certain level of inequality and poverty because they believe that individual ability is a strong determinant of success. Furthermore, most believe that income inequality is necessary for economic development. They are optimistic that a "rising tide will lift all boats" and that the proportion of rich people will increase over time.

That being said, about 51 percent of Chinese believe that the current income gap poses a threat to social stability (Whyte 2010: 45). Moreover, between 30 and 40 percent of Chinese express dissatisfaction with current levels of inequality within their neighborhoods and work units, and 28 percent believe that current inequality violates the principles of socialism. About a quarter of Chinese believe that the proportion of poor in China will increase (44). Thus, a substantial minority of Chinese people are pessimistic about the future and appear quite unhappy with current levels of inequality. In other words, Chinese views on inequality are certainly not homogenous, and the danger posed by an angry dissenting minority still remains. Middle and upper-class urbanites with high levels of education are the most likely to express dissatisfaction with inequality in China (110). Surprisingly, rural residents are more satisfied and optimistic about current economic conditions than both urbanites and migrant workers, even when controlling for level of education (238). This is likely because under Maoist socialism most rural residents lived in abject poverty. When comparing their current standard of living with the past, many rural residents see little reason to complain.

### **Changing Status Hierarchies in Post-Reform China**

Scholars have observed that China's continuing transition from what was once a nationally-isolated communist society to a globalized market economy has led to changes in how Chinese evaluate social status (Yan 2003; Fong 2004; Hoffman 2006; Fong 2007; Hsu 2007; Hanser 2008; Osburg 2013). Status hierarchies remain in flux, following China's rapid transformations in areas of economy, population, laws, and interactions with other countries. Scholars disagree, however, on the processes by which new status hierarchies are created, as well as the nature of contemporary China's predominant status hierarchies.

Several scholars have conducted interviews and ethnographies among Chinese citizens to better understand how neoliberal subjects and social boundaries are created and maintained. Some have shown how hierarchies are shaped within post-reform China's new market-based institutions and practices, such as shopping centers, job markets, and dating. These scholars often appear to treat the market as a causal

variable. Hanser (2008) compared a privately-owned department store with a state-owned department store and found that employees and customers in the privately-owned department store learned to make “status distinctions” based on each other’s apparent wealth in order to maximize their own profit. Not only is conspicuous consumption essential to social status and self-esteem in modern China (Otis 2011), it is also essential to cultivating social networks and doing business (Osburg 2013).

In a similar vein, some scholars see *suzhi* discourse as little more than a superficially Chinese version of a more global neoliberal ideology. These scholars have pointed to the importance of *suzhi* discourse in naturalizing inequality and creating neoliberal subjects (Anagnost 1997; Ong 1999; Yan 2003). However, scholars contest the nature of this discourse. Some scholars see *suzhi* as a stand-in for labor value, similar to Marx’s conception of the commodity fetish. Yan (2003) notes how attributing low “*suzhi*” to low-paid workers obscures their exploitation. *Suzhi* discourse, according to some scholars, facilitates neoliberal ideology by holding individuals responsible for cultivating their own human capital. Yan (2003) and Fong (2003, 2004) note that many Chinese believe that *suzhi* can be improved through various forms of education, including self-study, private lessons, and professional development. As competition for jobs and social status becomes more intense, more parents and young people look for ways to improve their own “*suzhi*.” Kipnis (2007), on the other hand, emphasizes that *suzhi* discourse is not synonymous with neoliberal discourse, as in some contexts Chinese view differential distribution of *suzhi* as part of society’s natural and enduring moral order, not something that can be attained through individual effort.

Several scholars have emphasized how their subjects agentically shape status hierarchies by using narrative to ascribe different career paths with different levels of prestige (Fong 2003; Hsu 2007). Fong shows how Chinese citizens occupying various social positions define *suzhi* in distinct, self-interested ways. She observes that upper-class young people associate *suzhi* with having a wide range of experiences, cultural knowledge, and hobbies, while working-class young people associate *suzhi* with hard work, humility, and patriotism. Similarly, migrant workers will criticize the low *suzhi* of city

dwellers who extravagantly spend money, particularly young people who receive money from their parents. Educational leaders in China have promoted the idea that schools should teach “suzhi” to students by introducing them to extra-curricular activities which cultivate the “whole person.” The national government has decreed that Chinese schools should incorporate *suzhi jiaoyu* (quality education) into their curriculums by teaching traditional Chinese arts such as calligraphy.

Hsu (2007) shows that socialist institutions such as party membership continue to shape status. Government careers continue to be highly sought after and respected because of their perceived stability, affiliation with political power, and service to society. Hsu also argues that a traditional Chinese admiration for education, combined with ideas about the importance of science and technology to China’s modernity, lead professionals in the sciences and technology to have higher status than small-scale entrepreneurs (*getihu*). Hoffman (2006), on the other hand, shows that Chinese young adults’ do not simply pursue more money or stability when looking for jobs, but also value careers that provide autonomy.

### **Contradictions**

As members of different social groups are increasingly seen as equally deserving of rights, they are also increasingly seen as equal in potential. Explicit racism is no longer acceptable, at least not in public (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Yet as Khan (2011) has pointed out, even as North American society appears more inclusive and egalitarian than ever before, economic inequality is at an all time high. Furthermore, the wealth gap between Blacks and whites in the United States was higher during the Obama administration than it was in the 1980s.

Similar contradictions face modern China. Though Deng Xiaoping proclaimed that it was acceptable to “let some get rich first,” China is still a nominally socialist country under the control of the Chinese Communist Party. The current president, Xi Jinping, speaks at length about the dignity of working class people and the importance of listening to the masses. Chinese elites who flaunt their privilege and appear to abuse subordinates can face the wrath of angry netizens or become targets of the

administration's highly publicized anti-corruption campaign. As in the United States, *explicit* or *de jure* discrimination on the basis of ascribed characteristics, including regional background or accent, is no longer acceptable in mainstream society. Thus, China's elites face the same quandary as many North Americans: *How can inequality be legitimized in an officially egalitarian society?*

In *Privilege*, an ethnographic study of the prestigious St. Paul's preparatory school in New Hampshire, Khan (2011) illuminates how adolescent elites are taught to resolve this contradiction. Students learn to frame society as a meritocracy in which hard work and talent explain success. Hierarchies are natural and are fair, for they can be climbed by the hard-working and talented. Moreover, students learn to see their own privilege not as a birthright, but as something which must be developed and cultivated through experience. Finally, the mark of well-deserved privilege is not exclusivity, but "radical egalitarianism" (Khan 2011: 16). Students learn to distinguish themselves through cultural omnivorousness, conspicuously consuming both classical music and hip hop, fine art and NASCAR. This egalitarianism extends to social interactions: privilege requires showing that you feel comfortable in virtually every social situation, whether interacting with those above or below you on the social hierarchy. One respects the hierarchy while pretending it isn't there.

We might expect young Chinese volunteers from privileged backgrounds to legitimate inequality in ways similar to the adolescent elite in American preparatory schools. China's education system is structured upon a logic of competition and meritocracy. Placement into middle school, secondary school and college are all based upon performance on standardized tests. Schools in each district are ranked according to quality, and within each school students are separated into elite and basic tracks. Within each classroom, students are ranked according to performance, with higher ranked students often assigned to sit closer to the front of the classroom. Supporters of China's test-based education system often justify it as one of the few institutions within China in which genuine social mobility is possible.

Furthermore, like the students studied by Khan, Chinese volunteers may heavily rely upon their experiences, as opposed to knowledge or birthright, as status markers. Many of the volunteers whom I



interviewed hoped to apply to American graduate schools and they believed that a record of diverse extra-curricular experiences was essential to admission. Chinese volunteers may also embrace egalitarianism and cultural omnivorism, as both western and Chinese institutions increasingly require members to show their appreciation for and experience with “diverse” communities, or in the case of the Chinese Communist Party, the “masses.”

Khan’s prescription for privilege may not fully apply to China, however. Despite Chinese education’s meritocratic logic, inequality of opportunity is obvious to many. Many of China’s wealthiest citizens send their children to study abroad, an educational path which is financially prohibitive to the majority of Chinese parents. Chinese universities apply quotas which vastly favor students from large cities compared to students from rural provinces. In most large cities, laws prevent the children of migrant workers from attending schools or taking tests in the same city where their parents work, which forces these students to attend schools in their rural hometowns or go without formal schooling altogether. Kipnis claims that Chinese people see inequality as part of a natural, enduring social order, not simply the result of meritocracy. Indeed, less than half of Chinese surveyed believe that equal opportunities exist for everyone (Whyte 2010). Volunteer teachers, in particular, are most likely aware of the difference in opportunities afforded to themselves and their rural students. Furthermore, volunteers who attended Western universities are likely aware that their ability to attend these universities was not solely the result of hard work, for these fortunate students were, in fact, able to skip the notoriously competitive Chinese college entrance exam. Thus, we might expect Chinese volunteers to incorporate acknowledgment of unequal opportunity into their perceptions of inequality. My findings regarding Chinese volunteers may have implications for the United States as well. While the preparatory school students studied by Khan may have genuinely believed that the United States is a meritocracy, American elites may increasingly be forced to acknowledge that unequal opportunity is a problem. Inequality has become a dominant theme in this year’s election, and even far-right politicians like Paul Ryan have openly revised their stances on poverty, stressing the need to increase opportunities for upward mobility.

In this study, I argue that Chinese NGO volunteers legitimate inequality not primarily through a hierarchy of ability and talent, but through a hierarchy of autonomy. Volunteers distinguish themselves horizontally, from their privileged urban peers, by claiming that they are “jumping off the track” by choosing to volunteer rather than immediately pursue traditional career paths. Volunteers also distinguish themselves from their peers by claiming to be more altruistic and egalitarian, and less involved in mainstream consumerism. Volunteers distinguish themselves vertically, from the rural poor, by framing rural people as conformist, irrational, short-sighted and lacking self-esteem. This framing of rural people is not explicit, but instead subtly implied through volunteers’ narratives about rural people’s life choices and life trajectories. Disadvantaged groups are increasingly expected to “think outside the box” and create their own opportunities outside of traditional meritocratic hierarchies.

In addition to accounting for elites’ recognition of the problem of unequal opportunity, I further build upon Khan’s thesis by examining the role of agency in constructing legitimations of inequality. All of the NGOs I researched were founded in the past 10 years. Aside from Beautiful China, which was co-founded by an Italian American while he was in his mid-20s, all of the NGOs I researched were founded by Chinese citizens who had studied in the United States. The leaders and volunteers in these are continuously involved in constructing and framing China’s non-profit sector. Although they draw upon Western models and discourses when constructing their frames, they agentially frame their organizations and ideologies as being beneficial for China and in accordance with Chinese values and conditions. They construct narratives and enforce styles of talk in ways which not only serve their organizations’ purposes, but also legitimate inequality.

Furthermore, I investigate how privileged people resolve contradictions that arise between discourse and reality, both within and outside of cross-class interaction. These contradictions should be more obvious in actual cross-class interaction. Unlike the maintenance workers of St. Paul’s School, rural people might talk back if they disagree with urban volunteers. By learning about volunteers’ interactions, I investigate how they situate themselves in relation to poor people and interpret poor people’s words and

actions. I find that volunteers are aware of their own privilege, but see it as inevitable. They consciously and conspicuously deemphasize difference in opportunity between themselves and rural people.

Volunteers collectively enforce styles of talk which allow them to ignore structural inequalities. They profess egalitarianism while subtly building symbolic boundaries and maintaining social boundaries between themselves and the rural poor.

In summary, building upon the work of Bourdieu (1996) and Khan (2011), rather than just show how a culture of privilege is taught and practiced among the elite, I show how an emerging culture of privilege is developed and practiced through within-class and cross-class interactions in the context of globalization. This culture of privilege draws upon world society notions of individual agency, yet portends to add “Chinese characteristics.” Furthermore, I show how *explicit* horizontal symbolic boundaries (between elites) are used to obscure *implicit* vertical symbolic and social boundaries (between social strata). The processes of distinction among elites are explicit yet do not necessarily prevent elites from socializing across boundaries (as in a friendly rivalry between Ivy League colleges). In contrast, elites proclaim their love for the poor while subtly condescending toward them and preventing extended socialization with them.

### **Volunteerism in Post-Reform China**

As inequality has risen, so too have the number of NGOs and government-sponsored volunteer programs designed with the stated purpose of reducing inequality. Programs which directly state that they are targeting economic inequality are rare. Instead, many non-profit and volunteer organizations claim to target “educational inequity” or “the rural-urban gap.”

The number of officially registered NGOs in China has grown from 4,400 in 1988 to over 500,000 in 2013 (Spires, Tao, and Chan 2014). One national network of volunteer teachers included over 100 organizations in 2008 (Geng 2008). Although government has cracked down on foreign influence within NGOs, leaders have also expressed their support for the non-profit sector as long as it refrains from political dissidence. Peking University, for example, recently opened a school of social entrepreneurship

which aims to encourage charity and corporate social responsibility. The government also issued a directive to send 20,000 recent college graduates to teach in elementary and intermediate schools in western China each year as part of a larger “develop the west” initiative (Zhang and Lin 2008). Volunteer teachers almost always teach in elementary and intermediate schools, as principals of high schools are usually very concerned with their students’ performance on the college entrance examination and fear that volunteer teachers do not know how to train students to achieve high scores on this examination, which is highly dependent on memorization.

Because volunteer teachers are typically university students or university graduates, they usually come from a very different background than that of their rural students. Thus, volunteer teaching provides cases of cross-class interaction outside of the marketplace, and examining these interactions may reveal more about status distinctions and attitudes toward inequality than simply conducting a close-ended survey of opinions.

### **Education and Employment**

Although both NGOs and China’s leaders continue to frame education as the best means of social mobility, the cost of secondary and post-secondary education, combined with the high rate of unemployment among university graduates, might suggest otherwise. When one considers both the obvious and hidden costs of secondary and post-secondary education, as well as the tenuous relationship between education and employment in China, it is not hard to understand why many rural students choose to drop out.

Unemployment of recent university graduates has risen sharply (Li, Whalley, and Xing 2014), estimated at between 15 and 30 percent (Sharma 2014), while unemployment of non-college graduates has decreased. The decreasing return to a university education is likely caused by the rapid expansion of university enrollment which began in the 1990s (Yang, Chen and Monarch 2010; Bai 2006). Moreover, graduates of low quality colleges and vocational schools make substantially less money than graduates of first-tier universities (Zhong 2011), and there is very little income return to high school education versus

intermediate education (Li, Liu, and Zhang 2012). Although elementary and intermediate education is officially “compulsory” and free of charge, students in rural boarding schools are often expected to pay for room and board. The cost of tuition and living expenses in high school and university, combined with a paucity of financial aid, continue to prevent poor students from advancing their education (Liu et al. 2009). Moreover, the cost of university tuition has rapidly risen in the past 20 years (Dong and Wan 2012).

While university tuition has become more expensive and the return to a Bachelor’s degree has decreased, wages for low-skilled labor have increased. More than half of rural people now work off-farm, and wages of migrant workers rose by about 10% between 2010 and 2014, with the largest gains in the manufacturing and construction industries (Chinese Bureau of Statistics 2015). Thus, in the eyes of many rural young people, finding low-skilled work in local factories or in urban areas is preferable to continuing high school or university. Furthermore, some rural young people do not want to impose a financial burden upon their parents by continuing their education (Hannum and Adams 2009).

### **Symbolic Boundaries and Inequality**

Lamont and Molnár (2002) define symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors.” These conceptual distinctions are often used to distinguish groups of people or categorize people into hierarchies. Social boundaries, on the other hand, are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources.” Lamont and Molnár claim that “at the causal level, symbolic boundaries can be thought of as a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of social boundaries.” In this study, I examine how volunteers’ narrative practices help to reinforce implicit symbolic boundaries while hiding social boundaries between the rich and poor.

### **Individualism and Agency**

Agency can be roughly defined as the capacity to act and effect change through one’s own volition. Giddens (1991) maintains that modernization allows individuals to increasingly define themselves and the conditions of their existence, while Meyer and Jepperson (2000) emphasize that

agentic actorhood is a social construction. Skeggs (2004) claims that, contrary to what she sees as the classed view of Giddens, actual ability to define one's own identity is subject to enduring unequal social relations.

Taylor (1989) and Giddens (1991) explain how the discovery of one's "authentic self," seen as the source of agentic actorhood, has become thought of as a moral duty in modern society. Modern society claims that the "self" is to be found within the individual, rather than through social categories external to the individual. However, it is an elite few who stipulate the proper methods of finding the self. Abercrombie and Foucault show that Freudian psychotherapy and Catholic confessional, for example, require what Meyer and Jepperson (2000) might call socially-constructed "disinterested others" to interlocute the search for the self.

Volunteers believe that agency is something which rural people can potentially possess, but must first be transmitted through a certain style of education which volunteers are best equipped to provide. Volunteers ascribe themselves with the highest level of realized agency, while claiming that rural people are more susceptible to acting without thinking or not acting at all.

### **Narrative**

Understanding the characteristics and functions of narrative is crucial to understanding how Chinese volunteers perceive inequality and their volunteerism. This is because inequality is rendered acceptable or unacceptable depending on its perceived context within temporal narratives and moral stories: Is inequality increasing or decreasing over time? Are things getting better or worse for the majority of Chinese people? Is poverty a thing of the past or is it with us today? Is a person's wealth the result of immoral behavior, such as corruption, or is it the result of hard work and talent?

Volunteers also use narrative to explain why poor people's life choices are wise or unwise. Volunteer teachers tell their students that dropping out of school will eventually lead to their ruin. Volunteers use narrative to imagine the results of their volunteerism. If they can inspire a child to "have dreams," then that child may one day attend China's top university or start a successful business.

Importantly, volunteers use narrative to describe the cause of poor people's actions, and in doing so, ascribe agency or lack of agency to poor people. For example, volunteers who describe a student's decision to drop out of school as "following the crowd," "following their parent's path," or "repeating a cycle" imply that the student dropped out of school because they lack the ability to make autonomous, rational decisions. Conversely, a volunteer may describe high-achieving students as "pursuing their dreams."

According to Polletta (1998, 2006), the ambiguity and mystery of narratives can be used to their advantage in creating collective identity and motivating people to action. Volunteer organizations may specify their intended results when applying for grants or reporting to donors, but volunteers themselves are often motivated by a sense of adventure: the idea that they are embarking upon the unknown and that the positive effects of their spirit and actions will unfold over time in ways that are impossible to predict. Taking the "risk" of setting out on uncharted territory by volunteering, as opposed to taking a more conventional life path, can also be the basis of an identity claim. Volunteers may claim their choice to volunteer was spontaneous, rebellious, and risky, thereby establishing their identity as brave mavericks. Narratives of risk-taking can also be used to justify spectacular wealth as the product of the individual's superior faith, self-confidence and destiny. China's contemporary billionaires tell stories about their rise to success which are full of unexpected twists and turns. As Alibaba founder Jack Ma told Charlie Rose, "I even went to KFC when it came to my city. Twenty-four people went for the job. Twenty-three were accepted. I was the only guy [rejected]" (Lutz 2015). This quote has been made into memes and has been forwarded countless times by young people around the world hungry for inspiration.

The current Chinese government's official propaganda promotes an ambiguous and forward-looking narrative. President Xi Jinping has popularized the term "China Dream," which is used to refer to a vague but glorious future for China, aggregated from the infinitely diverse individual dreams of the Chinese people. The "China Dream" and other neoliberal narratives offer a similar promise: individual people, acting upon their own enlightened self-interest and expressing their individual creativity, will

push humanity forward. There is no need to worry about equal shares, for optimism, rationality and innovation will make the pot bigger for everyone. In this study, I show how Chinese volunteers draw upon these master narratives to make individual and collective identity claims, as well as make sense of inequality and volunteerism.

By showing how privileged young adults use the material and cultural resources at their disposal to create new kinds of status hierarchies, which obscure material relations while promoting post-materialist ideals, I aim to bridge the gap between structuralist and constructionist analyses of symbolic boundaries. Moreover, research on the impact of China's reforms on social status has neglected the role of China's rapidly growing non-profit and voluntary sector. Scholars of world society have demonstrated the importance of NGOs in propagating global culture. A key facet of global culture is the "common sense" acceptance that the world is composed of agentic actors—entities that think and act in an autonomous and rational manner. I show that educational NGOs in China reflect and reinforce the concept of agency as an ideal attribute of modern individuals. NGO staff and volunteers indeed believe that everyone has the capacity for agency. However, in a variant of the Orwellian edict that "some are more equal than others," they maintain that some groups of people act more agentially than others. Volunteers construct themselves as authorities who are qualified to teach others how to think and act more autonomously, rationally and effectively—in other words, how to be proper agentic actors. Thus, NGOs do not merely propagate the concept of agentic actorhood—they also help create boundaries based on the degree to which one is perceived to act agentially.

### **Methodological Considerations and Selection of Volunteer Organizations**

I conducted formal, in-depth interviews with 18 former or current NGO volunteers and staff and 5 Communist Youth League temporary rural teachers in 2013 and 2014. I conducted most of these interviews in Beijing, and all but six interviews in Mandarin Chinese. These interviews typically took two to three hours to complete. I also conducted informal interviews with countless volunteers whom I met in the course of my field work. I spent two months volunteering in the countryside with two different



Chinese educational NGOs. Both of these NGOs required volunteers, including myself, to participate in intensive training sessions held online and in Beijing prior to going to volunteer field sites in the countryside. While in the countryside, I talked with dozens of rural principals, teachers, and farmers, most of whom were the parents or grandparents of children attending rural schools where I volunteered. While not volunteering in the countryside, I lived in Beijing, where over the course of a year I volunteered once a week with an NGO that held supplementary classes for migrant workers' children. I attended a variety of training sessions, meetings, and presentations held by education-related NGOs in Beijing. I also engaged in countless conversations about social issues in China with people from a variety of sectors of society. Furthermore, I continually observed discussions and posts related to Chinese education NGOs on social media.

When I began my research I already had several close friends who were overseas Chinese citizens studying in the United States. They were able to provide me with contacts for my fieldwork in China. I was also enthusiastically welcomed by many Chinese educational non-governmental organizations, who thought that it would be valuable for rural students to meet a foreigner. By volunteering with Chinese educational NGOs, I was able to meet many other volunteers, the majority of whom were highly-educated upper-class Chinese citizens in their 20s.

I initially encountered many obstacles to participating in Chinese volunteer organizations. On one occasion, I was recruited by a volunteer organization and participated in training but ultimately could not participate in the volunteer activity because local authorities in rural areas would not accept the involvement of any foreigners. I was told by organization staff this was most likely because local authorities feared liability if a foreigner was harmed in their jurisdiction. Other Chinese contacts told me that local authorities probably feared that foreigners would expose corruption in rural areas. I was also told that there were recently many news stories about foreign teachers in China doing "bad things." On another occasion, several days before my planned train trip to Yunnan with three other volunteers from DreamAction, I was informed by the extremely apologetic president of DreamAction that local authorities

in the program location in Yunnan recently informed them that they would not allow my presence on account of my being a foreigner. One Chinese contact, whose father is a police officer in Yunnan, told me that recent terrorist attacks in China, which are often blamed on “hostile foreign influences” in official media, have led local authorities in rural areas to be less welcoming of foreigners. He also cited the popular Chinese saying “One more thing to deal with is not as good as one less thing to deal with” (*duo yi shi buru shao yi shi*). Eventually, through the great efforts of the DreamAction staff, I switched places with a volunteer who was originally assigned to Henan. In my third week of volunteering in Henan, three police officers and one local government official came to the rural school to question me on my background and intentions. They let me finish the remainder of my fieldwork and the principal was simply warned that he should have asked for permission from local authorities before inviting a foreigner into the school. I was recently informed by several volunteer organizations that, because of new regulations on NGOs and foreign teachers in China, they are no longer accepting any foreign volunteers.

### **Description of Volunteer Organizations**

#### **Beautiful China<sup>1</sup>**

Beautiful China was founded in 2008 by an American in his early 20s who was studying at Beijing’s prestigious Tsinghua University. This organization is officially registered within China as a public service organization (*gongyi zuzhi*). Its stated goal is to “eliminate educational inequity in China by enlisting promising future leaders from China and the United States.” Modeled after the United States organization Teach for America, Beautiful China sends recent university graduates to rural schools to teach for two years. “Fellows,” as the participants are called, receive the same salary as local teachers. While Beautiful China tried to recruit approximately one-fourth of its fellows from the United States in its first few years of operation, I was recently informed by a former staff member that the organization is no longer accepting volunteers who are not Chinese citizens because of new regulations and increased scrutiny from both local and national authorities. Beautiful China sends fellows to the relatively

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<sup>1</sup> All organization names, with the exception of the Communist Youth League, are pseudonyms.

unindustrialized southwestern province of Yunnan, and the relatively industrialized southern province of Guangdong. By 2014, the organization had sent approximately 300 fellows to schools in these provinces, though I was told that approximately one-fifth of fellows do not complete their two-year assignment.

I interviewed eight former Beautiful China teaching fellows, all Chinese citizens, and one staff member, a Chinese citizen who worked as a recruiter and program manager.

### DreamAction

DreamAction sends young volunteers, mostly Chinese citizens studying abroad in the United States and Canada, to rural areas of China to help set up libraries and reading activities, with the stated purpose of “cultivating children’s reading habit.” Although DreamAction leaders constantly reminded us that “we are not teachers,” and sought to distinguish DreamAction from popular Chinese volunteer teaching programs, we were expected to facilitate reading activities for schoolchildren in project schools, and visit students’ parents to encourage them to read to their children. I interviewed DreamAction’s president, a Chinese American woman who moved to the United States to attend middle school, and two volunteers, both Chinese citizens. I also participated in seven weekly training sessions as well as one-month of volunteering with DreamAction in a small farming village in Henan province.

### PAL

PAL was founded by a Chinese citizen who moved to the United States at the age of 13 and graduated from Harvard with a Bachelor’s degree in Asian studies, but retained Chinese citizenship. The stated purpose of the organization is to “give all students the choice to pursue a liberal arts education.” This organization recruits approximately 50 volunteers each year and conducts liberal arts summer camps at about 10 different small-town schools in rural provinces each year. The organization stresses the “four Cs” of “creativity, community, critical thinking, and citizenship.” I interviewed the president and two volunteers from PAL and I observed their training sessions and meetings. I also joined a team of about ten volunteers on a special winter program in which we interviewed rural students who had attended a PAL liberal arts summer camp about four years earlier. The purpose of this winter program was to “preserve

the connections among PAL students and volunteers” and collect interview material from former summer camp attendees which was to be used for program evaluation, training sessions, and a promotional book for PAL.

### Communist Youth League One-Year Rural Cadre Program

The Communist Youth League is an organization for Chinese citizens of 14-28 years of age. Its purpose is to bring young people closer to the Chinese Communist Party through a variety of political education and public service activities. The Communist Youth League mainly operates through Chinese schools. Students and advisors who directly participate in administration of the league belong to the Communist Youth League Committee (*tuanwei*).

The Chinese government allows a small percentage of university graduates to spend one year as a “rural cadre” in the countryside. “Rural cadres” may serve within rural schools, hospitals, or government administrative offices. Those who serve as a rural cadre may enter graduate school without taking a graduate school entrance examination. This serves as a primary motivation for many candidates. Several formal “rural cadres” informed me that in most universities the Communist Youth League administers selection of rural cadres. The Communist Youth League committee usually chooses candidates who have a strong “political record” of service to the party and who show thorough understanding of party doctrine. I interviewed five graduate students who had served as cadres in rural schools for one year and who were henceforth automatically granted admission to graduate school. Four served as teachers to rural students, and one of these four also conducted training sessions for rural teachers. One served not as a teacher, but as a school counselor and teaching assistant. All five interviewees had participated in the activities of the Communist Youth League while in university, and all five were in the process of becoming Chinese Communist Party members at the time of interview.

In addition to formally interviewing members of these organizations, I also interviewed several Chinese citizens who had volunteered with other Chinese educational NGOs.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**IDENTITY BUILDING AMONG THE PRIVILEGED:**  
**INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES OF VOLUNTEERISM**

2008 was an important year for China for many reasons: the contentious Olympic torch relay, several devastating earthquakes, riots in Tibet, and finally, the successful completion of the Olympic ceremonies in Beijing. 2008 was also important for China's civil society—for many Chinese citizens, this was the first year that they heard the word “volunteer” or themselves became “volunteers.” After 30 years of rapid economic growth, Chinese citizens appeared to yearn for something more—civic engagement, altruistic interaction, and a bridge to span the increasingly large gap between rich and poor. Of course, there have always been ways to practice public service and generosity in Chinese society. Confucian and Buddhist philosophy encouraged the well-off to give to the poor. Successful merchants built public monuments and pavilions in their hometowns. Following famines in rural areas, wealthy urban residents organized famine relief in order to prevent a flood of refugees to the city. In the last century, countless Chinese heeded Chairman Mao's call to “serve the people” by devoting their lives to the Communist Party. Beginning in 1962, approximately 17 million urban youths were “sent down” to the countryside to establish solidarity with the peasants and become educated through living in rural poverty (Pan 2007). Yet China's contemporary volunteers, who rushed to earthquake zones in Southwest China, eagerly welcomed “foreign guests” at the Beijing Olympics and the Shanghai Expo, and have held countless “liberal arts summer camps” in rural schools, style themselves as self-organized and self-directed champions of individual agency, not loyal servants of socialism.

In this chapter, I describe how Chinese volunteers talk about their motives for participating in the non-profit sector. I read their narratives about becoming volunteers as “conversion stories” rather than as objective accounts. Analogous to testimonies of religious conversion, in which converts engage in “biographical reconstruction” (Snow and Machalek 1983: 266) to highlight how their lives have changed, my respondents' tell stories about their path to becoming volunteers in a way which makes claims about

their current identities. Specifically, my respondents claim that they are more independent and autonomous than their peers, who they frame as merely “following a track.” I argue that former volunteers agentially use volunteerism and narratives of volunteerism to cultivate the identity of “social entrepreneur,” an identity which ultimately serves to justify their privilege. By framing autonomy as a personality characteristic, rather than a function of privilege, former volunteers naturalize their entry into the creative and managerial classes.

### **Wandering into Volunteerism**

The concept of “volunteering” was relatively new in 2010 and 2011, the years in which most of my respondents volunteered, and most Chinese citizens still do not perceive working for an NGO as being a legitimate career. According to Bai Xing<sup>2</sup>, who has worked in several NGOs:

Before 2008, if you said “volunteer” or “public service,” most people don’t know what you’re talking about. If I told my relatives I was doing “public service” they asked if I’m selling “public service goods,” souvenirs. My grandma, to this day doesn’t understand what I’m doing. My parents have a general idea of what I do. Before 2008 no one understood if you told them you were a “social enterprise” or “foundation.” But now they’re interested if you tell them, so the thinking has changed.

Generally speaking, NGOs still do not carry prestige in China. Several NGO employees complained to me that most Chinese people do not see NGO work as a legitimate career. However, NGOs are relatively new and exotic, which presents an opportunity: various actors, including volunteers, can frame NGOs in a way which suits their own interests. Furthermore, NGOs’ ties to powerful backers, as well as the involvement of American volunteers, can give them the sheen of legitimacy and status.

All of the volunteers whom I interviewed held several characteristics in common. They attended prestigious universities, described themselves as coming from financially secure backgrounds, and weren’t sure what they were going to do after graduation. Many complained that they had not chosen their college majors and did not find them interesting. Though some claimed to have been offered prestigious

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<sup>2</sup> All respondents’ names have been substituted with pseudonyms.

corporate positions which they decided to turn down, most did not have clear prospects, and they may have felt anxious about the extremely competitive job market for recent university graduates.

Yao Wenbing, who majored in law, described how his confusion over his career prospects, combined with Beautiful China's personalized recruiting process, led to his becoming a teaching fellow:

At that time it was my senior year, so I was going to lots of enterprises' presentations, and one of them was from Beautiful China. My roommate's friend, he knew about this and invited me. At that time only a few of us were there to really listen, most people were in that classroom [where the presentation was held] doing their own homework. We were about to leave, but as we were leaving [the speaker] came in and told us that we should stay and listen for a while.

At that time I wasn't very interested because after I heard [him] speak I still didn't really understand what the program was about. They asked me to leave my e-mail address, and I did, and then I just forgot about this program . . .

I'm from [XX] University. After a month, the principal of the university next to us, [XX] University, he had taught in Beautiful China. Maybe Beautiful China had him write this letter to many people: I received a letter from him asking me to apply to this program. I saw that he was very sincerely asking me to apply, so I went online and applied, and then I had an in-person interview, and I better understood it, and I felt good about it and thought maybe I'll go. My parents didn't oppose me going, they just told me to think about it more . . .

Real estate was booming at that time but I totally didn't understand this field, and I was really interested in IT, but having studied law it would have been very hard to get an IT job, so at that time I was very confused, so when I had this opportunity to join Beautiful China [I took it].

For a "directionless" college student on the cusp of graduation, joining an NGO seemed preferable to a white-collar desk job or the frustrations of the job market. Moreover, the NGOs aggressively pursued potential recruits at top colleges. Volunteering with an NGO allowed one to feel important and unique rather than redundant and expendable, so long as volunteers framed their involvement as an autonomous and altruistic choice.

### **Autonomy, Creativity, and Leadership Ability**

Although Wen Yaobing first acknowledged that he joined Beautiful China partly because he lacked decent alternatives, he quickly made sure to frame his decision to volunteer in more flattering

terms. He emphasized how his decision to become a teaching fellow reflected his unique personal qualities:

Compared to the old and middle aged people I came into contact in the state enterprises in the big cities, I much preferred interacting with these people [in Beautiful China], so I thought first I'll do this, and anyway, I'm still young, so I can do this and at the same time think about what I want to do later. I don't need to be like everyone else who's graduated, busy looking for work.

Perhaps I really wanted to jump out and give myself time to think, and then do, so I made a decision. It's very simple, I just wanted to do this first, and anyway I wasn't sure about my future, so it made more sense to first do something I enjoyed rather than something I wouldn't enjoy. Actually I'm fundamentally very optimistic, I didn't think about after two years what will I do, I didn't think about that at all, so I just did it.

In proclaiming “I don't need to be like everyone else who's graduated, busy looking for work,” and “I'm fundamentally very optimistic,” Wen Yaobing styles himself as a maverick who follows his heart. Like most volunteers I talked to, he framed his volunteerism as reflective of his personal characteristics of optimism and autonomy.

Qiu Shikai, Wen Yaobing's colleague and friend from Beautiful China, also framed his decision to join the organization as reflecting his autonomy and distinction from his peers:

At that time I just happened to attend the Beautiful China presentation, the same as [Wen Yaobing]. I had some curiosity; the first aspect was that I was curious, and the second aspect was that I wanted to do something original. Everyone else is going to corporations, nothing special, but I wanted to do something new, something different, so I applied for Beautiful China . . . The last point is the same as [Wen Yaobing], if you don't do it now, when will you do it? If we wait till we're old we won't have the opportunity, so we should dare to gamble when we're young. I think we have the ability to get through a lot when we're young, so I just followed my heart and did it.

In claiming “I wanted to do something original” and “I just followed my heart and did it,” Qiu Shikai emphasizes his autonomy and strong will. Virtually every respondent framed their choice to volunteer as a decision rooted in their desire to be different from their peers. Bai Xing, a man in his late 20s who dropped out of high school and has continuously jumped between low-paid positions at various NGOs, framed his path as more “meaningful” than the “typical route” of his peers:

Personally, I'm interested [in non-profit work] because I didn't complete my formal education. I thought school life was boring. I didn't want to follow the typical route of getting a job and having children. It didn't seem meaningful. I went to Peking University



to audit classes for three years. I studied English on my own. I realized that education was very interesting. I liked this kind of education.

Bai Xing went on to say that “Most people talk a lot and do little.” He spoke of his thrill at “bringing something new that was never there before.” He was not focused on the effects of his actions. What mattered most was that he was not afraid to try something new:

Personally, in my heart, I haven't found an answer [to how I can best help people] . . . I think any volunteer and NGO staff think: “I think this is interesting, but there are some things I'm not sure about.” Through the process of doing they will become more and more clear. Of course this work helps others, but people also do it to answer some questions for themselves . . . I know people who don't do any volunteer or NGO work, and most of the time they will complain about social and political problems. But they won't do anything to fix the problem themselves. Complaining is necessary, pondering is necessary, but you should also try to do something.

Volunteers often described their decision to volunteer as random, impulsive, and reflecting their willingness to take risks and forge new paths. Not only did they embrace this narrative while talking with me, they highlighted their maverick sensibilities while applying for competitive spots in graduate schools and companies. One Beautiful China volunteer refers to herself as, “a doer with guts, who isn't afraid to dream wild” on a social network profile.

The stories which these young Chinese volunteers tell about themselves reflect modern Western norms about what constitutes a good story. According to Polletta, “we moderns” believe that stories should be “idiosyncratic and emotional . . . the opposite of utilitarian” (2006: 25). Chinese volunteers frequent telling of “idiosyncratic and emotional” narratives may indicate how much they have internalized Western storytelling norms, but also reflects their desire to be professionally competitive within a job market which they believe prizes flexibility, passion, and innovation.

On the other hand, even as they described the idiosyncratic nature of their path toward volunteerism, volunteers emphasized leadership and intentionality in their volunteerism. Their narratives highlighted how they transformed from passive to active, from follower to leader:

So in the past, it's like everything [in my life] has been all set, you just follow what it's supposed to be and you don't need to plan for yourself that much. You don't need a clear goal for yourself. So I mean for a kid growing in the city in China, at least you need to get a college degree, otherwise you're nothing. So I mean it's like there's not many

options for us, so you're just following suit. You don't need to choose what I do in the future, you don't need to choose or perhaps you don't have to choose, things have been set for you. But after my second master's degree, that was the first time that I felt that I need to plan, I need to plan what is the next step for me, because there will not be anything for me to just follow . . . So at that moment, before I joined [Beautiful China], that was the time when I thought very seriously about what I want to do in the future. And then I joined that program, so it's like the whole fellowship was the first time that I chose to do something. I mean intentionally, chose to do something (Zou Yueling, Beautiful China, female).

Volunteers' narratives were both serendipitous and intentional. By emphasizing that they were open to "taking a gamble" but also claiming that volunteerism was their individual choice, respondents styled themselves as ideal entrepreneurs. In an increasingly precarious neoliberal marketplace, entrepreneurs, managers, creatives, and other professionals must not only show that they are loyal workers, but also sell themselves as self-starters, leaders, and problem solvers. In short, they must show that they are simultaneously capable, self-reliant, and adaptable to change. Volunteers hoped that volunteerism would provide them with opportunities to practice their autonomy, to be creative, and to lead rather than follow. Furthermore, while applying to volunteer and while describing their past volunteerism to others, volunteers gained valuable practice in narrating their experiences in a way which highlighted their distinction from their peers.

Similar to NGO volunteers, Communist Youth League (hereafter abbreviated as CYL) members from privileged backgrounds used their time in the countryside to prove their self-reliance. They temporarily eschewed material comfort while they developed their identities as self-reliant and capable individuals:

Respondent: Why did I choose [to teach in] this school? The main reason is to exercise myself. Because first of all, I grew up in Beijing since I was small. My school was always right next to my home, so my family wanted me to go somewhere far. Secondly, to go to a primitive and difficult area to train myself, and to better understand how the whole country really is, this is to train my own ability to stand on my own, and to better understand the country's conditions. And another, more practical objective was to be able to go to graduate school more easily. But this was really not the decisive factor...

Interviewer: Was your first choice to go to Qinghai?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to go there?

Respondent: I heard that the conditions in Xinjiang and Yunnan were better, but I wanted to see the most difficult place. (Shunzhi, male, CYL)

Shunzhi's comfortable upbringing in Beijing led him to feel that he needed to go to a "primitive and difficult area to train [his self]." Shunzhi later told me that the value of his family's apartment in Beijing was so high that it would be unimaginable to his rural students. Although CYL members did not value individualistic self-expression as much as NGO volunteers, CYL members from privileged backgrounds still hoped to prove their self-reliance through volunteering in the countryside.

### **Altruism and Concerns about Inequality**

Many volunteers are at least partially-motivated by genuine altruism and a sense of fairness. Wen Yaobing joined some short-term volunteer projects while in university, out of curiosity, but the poverty he witnessed seem to make an impression on him:

At university I participated in some volunteer teaching organizations, we went to the countryside to teach, and at that time I saw that the whole country's gap was so large . . . [Another time] I went to a school for migrant workers' children, in the northeast of Beijing. That school is really interesting, the outside is a huge impressive looking building, but after you walk in it's all square rooms, and the students were crammed together in a little space. It was a really backward place, and you can sense that this gap is really unbearable.

Yifei, a Beautiful China volunteer, explained how she became interested in volunteerism in college:

In 2008, when the Olympics just started, you would hear this word "volunteer" more and more. The city where I studied before isn't like Beijing or Shanghai, these kinds of big cities with these kinds of volunteer activities, so I really wanted to see this new kind of thing, and furthermore this word "volunteer" made me feel rather warm and comfortable. At that time I was rather naïve. And as far as my family is concerned, I have an uncle, my father's little brother, he has a small mental disability . . . when I was small I would see people bully him, and I just wished more people would care for these disadvantaged communities (*ruoshi qunti*).

Yifei acknowledged that volunteerism was attractive because she associated it with "big cities" and she "really wanted to see this new kind of thing." To her, volunteerism was a symbol of modernity and by becoming a volunteer she could cultivate herself as a modern citizen. However, the altruistic nature of volunteerism also appealed to her. Disillusioned with her college major of law, a field which she felt was

purely political and lacked any sense of human decency, the concept of volunteering made her “feel rather warm and comfortable.” As Bai Xing described some volunteers, “[T]here are some people who are just abundant in love. I call them “*neixin aixin fanlan*” (hearts overfilled with love for others). They want to go help people. Helping people gives them a feeling of success (*chengjiugan*). However, whether they are actually having a tangible effect is hard to say. But as long as they are doing something, they feel better.”

Even as we acknowledge the goodwill of many volunteers, there is a utilitarian side to displaying altruism. Modern businesses, for example, must do more than convince customers that they provide the best quality product. They also strive to prove that they are “socially-responsible.” *The Economist* coined this “philanthrocapitalism” (Bishop 2006) and Žižek (2009) and others have criticized the trend. The perception of altruism has become a competitive advantage not only for corporations, but also individual students and job-seekers, particularly in prosperous western societies. Several volunteers asked me to edit their personal statements for their applications to American graduate schools. They not only mentioned their volunteerism, they also emphasized that they were more genuine and altruistic than other volunteers. One applicant described how, while volunteering with disabled children, she made a special effort to get down on her hands and knees to make them feel like “she was one of them.” She contrasted her own compassionate attitude with that of the other volunteers who stood tall over the children. Another applicant described how, in contrast to volunteers who condescendingly feel pity for poor people and want to “give charity,” she instead aimed to “empower” rural children by helping them to develop their own potential. Thus, respondents not only highlighted their own altruism, they also framed their altruism in ways which showed their distinction from their peers. To put it another way, privileged volunteers framed their relationship with marginalized communities in a way which showed their superiority to other privileged volunteers.

## **Avoiding Talk of Politics**

Rather than use the language of social justice, volunteers typically described their volunteerism as motivated by personal biography. Like many volunteers, Yifei pointed to a specific aspect of her personal history, caring for her disabled uncle, which seemed to explain her altruism.

Although volunteers claimed to want to ameliorate inequality, or at least ameliorate some of the symptoms of inequality, they eschewed talk of politics. Most volunteers simply told me that they were not interested in politics. One said that he had read some political discussions between opposing factions in China on the internet. He felt that they argued merely for the sake of putting the other side down. Thus, he proclaimed, “I don’t get involved in political discussions. I want to stay clean.” Two co-founders of DreamAction, both in their early forties, also emphasized to me that they wanted the organization to steer clear of anything that could be tied to larger debates over China’s political future: n

Interviewer: Some organizations want to cultivate citizenship consciousness, and they have some political thoughts. What are your thoughts on this?

Chen Zhijian: Presently we want to completely eliminate all ideology, and this has ideology.

Feng Ziyi: Our earliest intention was that we didn’t want to sit at desks all day and discuss these things. We’d rather do something. As far as I’m concerned DreamAction is a place where you can really do something, and furthermore when you do things you will encounter many things that you must compromise on. Your own principles make you feel that you should do things this way, but you need to adapt to the reality, you need to make it workable, and also emphasize the other person, pay attention to your counterpart. It’s not a simple power relation. To put it bluntly this is a place to do real things.

Doing “real things” meant avoiding talk of politics, which they framed as merely “ideology.” Although some DreamAction leaders wanted volunteers to think about their own privilege, they did not want volunteers to discuss politics. The result was that volunteers would acknowledge their privilege yet claim that they lacked the power to reduce inequality outside of volunteerism.

## **National Identity and Intercultural Competence**

The only power relationships volunteers openly talked about were those between countries. Some respondents frame volunteerism as a patriotic act, claiming that they hope to improve China’s “quality” as

reputation in the world. Chen Zhijian, co-founder of DreamAction, described feeling affronted when hearing a former Canadian ambassador to China say that China had no civil society:

I think that my thinking is very Chinese, it's my own *identity* (says this word in English), it's also my self-construction. . . In 2010 at the University of Toronto they held a China Conference, and invited some people to come, of course they also invited me, and there was a panel discussion.

Another speaker told a story, he's a professor . . . he probably did political science, and he is also the Canadian ambassador to China. He said that China does not have the required characteristics for establishing civil society, and then he gave an example . . . The conclusion reached by this Canadian professor was that because of China's autocracy, there is no possibility of civil society in China, and Canada had to teach China about these things . . . In my view, at first I didn't care if there was civil society. I have my own rights, but everyone is changing . . . You can say that on every level, I really didn't know what to say. I was very angry, and I also felt very empathetic. That really gave me a motivation, because I didn't think much about what I was doing, I didn't apply any label [to my NGO work], but it was through this event that I came into contact with this kind of person.

Chen Zhijian had already founded DreamAction two years before hearing the Canadian ambassador claim that Canada has a lot to teach China about civil society. As a successful middle-aged man who had settled in Canada, he helped found the organization in order to “give back” to his homeland and address rising inequality. As a Chinese man living in Canada, however, he was sensitive to the way that westerners viewed China, and the motivation for his volunteerism became more explicitly patriotic. Volunteerism and other charitable actions could be a way of asserting one's Chinese identity. After the 2008 earthquakes, for example, after making a donation myself I sent a Chinese friend a link to a site where she could make a charitable donation to help the victims of the earthquake. She replied that she was glad that I wanted to help the victims of the earthquake, but that she strongly preferred to donate to a Chinese, rather than American organization, because she wanted to make her contribution “as a Chinese person.”

Despite wanting to prove the Canadian ambassador wrong, Zhijian also admitted that he felt “empathetic” to his words. A combination of national pride and self-castigation is common in China. One urban schoolteacher, the mother of a close friend in China, felt compelled to have me sit down for several minutes with her so that she could explain to me that “the core of the Chinese people is the slave

mentality. The second layer is the heart of a thief.” Volunteers framed themselves as spiritual leaders for Chinese people by diagnosing problems in Chinese people’s thinking and proposing volunteerism as a solution. One educational NGO newsletter which I subscribed to carried the following fake RAND report as its headlining story. This “RAND report,” which harshly criticizes contemporary Chinese culture, is illuminating because it is fake. The fact that it continues to be circulated and believed to be real many years after the real RAND Corporation denounced it as a hoax is testament to its resonance among many Chinese readers. The report denounces Chinese culture as being insular, selfish and materialistic:

Chinese people lack trust and social responsibility. Chinese people do not understand that as individuals in society they have a responsibility and obligation to society. Ordinary Chinese people often only care about their own family and relatives. Chinese society is founded upon clan relations and not upon the basis of a rational society.

Most Chinese have never learned what it means to live a dignified and respectable life . . . Chinese people don’t have the courage to pursue what they think is correct. Firstly, they don’t have the ability to distinguish what is correct, because their thinking has been corrupted by greed. Furthermore, even if they have the ability to know what is correct, they lack the bravery to put the truth into practice.

Very few Chinese understand this truth, that hopes and achievements can only be realized through a step-by-step process of hard work and sacrifice. Simply put, if one only seeks to make a livelihood (谋生), they will only want to receive. But if someone wants to truly live (生活), they must be willing to contribute.

Most Chinese people are not interested in living a life of balance or meaning. On the contrary, they are infatuated with material things, far more so than westerners. Most Chinese discovered that they don’t understand the concepts of spirit, freedom of faith, and healthy mind, because their thinking still hasn’t reached a higher level. Their thinking is stuck on their animal instinct and their pitiful lust for food and objects. In the eyes of Chinese people, receiving education isn’t for the purpose of seeking truth or improving the quality of one’s life, it is just a social status symbol . . . What Chinese people lack most isn’t wisdom, it is bravery and pure moral character . . . Following the destruction and gradual withering away of China’s traditional character, even educated people still hesitate to begin the journey of the spirit and mind.

This essay essentializes Chinese character and places Chinese people within an evolutionary narrative, claiming that Chinese people’s thinking “still hasn’t reached a higher level” and is “stuck on their animal instinct.” The essay blames Chinese culture as a whole for China’s problems rather than placing blame on any specific group, portraying different groups of Chinese in relation to one another, or analyzing

political systems and the distribution of resources. This framing elides class antagonisms and implies that Americans, *and* Chinese who have been to the United States, have the authority to critique and develop contemporary Chinese culture.

Overseas Chinese students, in particular, framed themselves as possessing “Western” experience and knowledge which they could impart to the rest of China. NGO leaders and trainers who had studied in North America often taught local Chinese volunteers and collaborators about the advantages of a supposedly Western style of education which values students’ individuality and creativity. They also claimed that cultivating supposedly Western characteristics of “faith” and the “spirit of volunteerism” within China was more important than any measurable, tangible effects. Government initiatives encouraging and celebrating “returned overseas talent” lent legitimacy to Chinese cosmopolitans’ sense of superiority. By volunteering in an NGO, well-off Chinese young adults could display their familiarity with the “West” as a valuable asset.

Moreover, volunteerism gave both domestic Chinese and overseas Chinese opportunities to gain “diverse” experiences and represent themselves as multiculturally fluent. These volunteers knew that their career success hinged upon their ability to communicate with and win the favor of people from diverse backgrounds. Thus, as explained to me by the president of DreamAction, Chinese applicants from North American universities often wanted to volunteer in the Chinese countryside in order to show future employers that they valued diversity and were capable of interacting with all kinds of people. Chinese young adults who had never had the opportunity to go abroad, on the other hand, were more excited about the opportunity to work within a semi-foreign organization and meet American people. NGOs touted “diversity” as an inherent good, but the actual transnational nature of many NGOs also provided volunteers with valuable cultural capital.

Even as many young Chinese volunteers sought multicultural fluency, however, they also sought to attach a distinguishably “Chinese” identity to their volunteerism and organizations. Note the similarity



between how Xu Leitao, a middle-aged cofounder of DreamAction, and Qiu Shikai, a Beautiful China volunteer in his 20s, describe their vision of civil society in China:

So I feel we are receiving a lot of influence from Western thinking, but there is also influence from traditional Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and also Chinese Marxism, you can say that this is a very Chinese organization, an extremely Chinese organization. As far as what happens in the locations is hard to say. At least my personal hope is [that our organization will be] very Chinese (Xu Leitao, DreamAction, male).

I think perhaps [the future of China] depends on one strata of people. I don't know if us post-80s generation one day will be the mainstream . . . I hope that some people will come from a certain strata, and when they are mainstream they will have a better worldview, a more international worldview, a more Chinese worldview to look at this problem (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China, male).

Ma Jun acknowledged the importance of “Western thinking,” but also emphasized that “this is a very Chinese organization.” Qiu Shikai stated that a “better worldview” is both “more international” and “more Chinese.” Volunteers seemingly paradoxical emphasis on both internationalism and “Chineseness” can be partly explained by volunteers’ desire to maximize their capital as Chinese people who can travel and communicate transnationally. NGO volunteers thus frame themselves as capable of synthesizing diverse cultures, combining the best characteristics of each nationality, as well as revitalizing authentic Chinese identity in a globalized world.

### **Billionaire Role Models**

NGO volunteers described their decision to volunteer as unplanned and serendipitous, but also as reflecting their qualities of *autonomy*, *altruism*, and *multicultural fluency*. Why did they highlight these particular qualities, in contrast to Communist Youth League members, who more often highlighted “influence,” “ability,” “studying hard,” “standardization,” and being “mainstream”? The answer may partly lie in who the NGO volunteers saw as their role models. While some derided their peers’ obsession with Alibaba founder Jack Ma, many volunteers spoke with admiration about entrepreneurs who supposedly “changed the world” through their “innovation.” When Apple founder Steve Jobs passed away, many Chinese media outlets eulogized him with effusive praise. Editorials in liberal Chinese media desperately asked, “Where is our Steve Jobs?” and lamented that Chinese people lacked his self-

confidence, individuality and creativity (Liu and Berkowitz 2014). A DreamAction staff member told me that she was moved to tears when she saw a video about the founder of Taobao, an online shopping platform, and learned how he had “empowered” millions of rural villagers to “spread their culture by selling their local specialties to people all over the world” through the internet. Wang Yuan, a DreamAction volunteer, told me, “We Chinese admire people like Bill Gates, Warren Buffet. We say they are good billionaires. They made money through their own intelligence and hard work. They use their money to help people. China needs more of that kind of billionaire.”

As reflected in some liberal-leaning Chinese media’s fawning over “self-made” successes like Steve Jobs and Tu Youyou (who won a Noble Prize in 2015 but was never a member of China’s National Academy of Sciences), entrepreneurs and others “outside the system” have risen from lowly *getihu* (self-employed) status to being hailed as *chuangyezhe* (literally, business creators) who are leading China into a glorious future. The “self-made” patriotic social entrepreneur appears to have it all: He is not only rich, he is virtuous as well. It is no wonder, then, that many of my respondents constructed narratives of volunteerism which mirrored the narratives associated with their idols.

### **Discussion: Volunteerism and Distinction**

Volunteers’ narratives about becoming volunteers highlighted their autonomy and altruism. They saw volunteering with NGOs as an attractive life choice partly because this kind of volunteerism seemed to provide leadership experience and cosmopolitan capital. In this way, volunteers hoped to use their volunteerism to distinguish themselves from their peers and gain contacts and experiences which could prepare them for entrepreneurial careers. Moreover, volunteers hoped to build their own emerging identities as adults by framing themselves as capable of teaching and leading poor rural people.

Respondents framed their volunteerism in ways which positively compared themselves to their peers, even when those peers were other volunteers. Although volunteers drew *implicit* boundaries between themselves and the rural poor, volunteers drew more *explicit* boundaries between themselves and their peers than between themselves and members of the marginalized groups they claimed to be serving.

Why would volunteers, who mostly came from very privileged backgrounds, be concerned with drawing boundaries between themselves and their privileged peers? One possible explanation is that while privileged young adults may seek to justify their privilege in relation to the poor, many see themselves as primarily in competition with their peers for jobs, places at elite universities, and, more generally, prestige. Thus, they will draw boundaries not only vertically, between different strata, but also horizontally, in order to distinguish themselves from other people in their own strata.

### **Volunteers' Narratives of Growing Up in Established Institutions**

By framing their decision to join a volunteer organization as simultaneously autonomous, haphazard and serendipitous, volunteers from privileged backgrounds *misrecognize* (Bourdieu 1996) how their social position facilitates their decision to “jump off the track” and volunteer. NGO volunteers' privileged social positions, at a certain point in their lives, began to feel restrictive rather than empowering. They became dissatisfied with the social institutions they inhabited, such as the Chinese education system and the Communist Party. Yet at the same time, it was their privileged position within these established institutions which allowed them to access alternative institutions and assert their independence through volunteerism. The following section describes how volunteers' backgrounds shaped their identities and values, which influenced their decision to volunteer and their goals as volunteers.

#### *Individualist Idealists Turning Away from “Traditional Chinese Education”*

Most NGO volunteers grew up in well-off families in which at least one parent worked within the government or a state enterprise. They went to highly-ranked college preparatory high schools, and most claimed to have done well in school but still felt dissatisfied with the test-based style of education they received. NGO volunteers' common desire to “reform” Chinese education partially motivated their decision to volunteer with education-related NGOs. These respondents claimed that the “traditional Chinese education system” did not encourage creativity or independent thinking. Some felt that they were punished for resisting a strict test-based learning style. They felt that volunteer teaching with an NGO,

particularly an NGO with ties to the United States, would allow them to use their own creativity in planning lessons and “be responsible for their own decisions.” They also hoped to help reform China’s education system to allow more individuality among students.

Yifei, who had volunteered with Beautiful China, spoke at length about her negative experiences with “test-based education.” Yifei told me that she attended her city’s top-ranked elementary school and that her mother constantly put pressure on her to achieve high test scores so that she could not only advance to the city’s top middle school and high school, but also test into the top class in each grade level. Although Yifei was able to test into the city’s top high school, preparing for the college entrance exam brought even more difficulties:

In high school there was a lot of pressure from the approaching college entrance exam. My math and physics grades weren’t very good, so that was kind of a hard time for me . . . One teacher’s words made a big influence on me. Since I was small I have always done things very slowly. I write characters very slowly, I write essays and do math very slowly. In high school the workload was even more, so I sometimes couldn’t finish a test within the two hours. So my teacher asked me, “Why do you take the test so slowly?” I said that it was because I write slowly. And then the teacher said, “I don’t think it’s that you write slowly, I think it’s that your brain is rather slow.” I didn’t know what to say . . . This incident really made me lose confidence in myself.

Yifei continued by describing how she preferred those teachers who did not focus on raising students’ test scores, but rather told interesting stories about the wider world and created an enjoyable atmosphere:

In high school I had a really great teacher who taught lessons in a lively manner. She didn’t just care about our test scores, she taught a lot of things. But in high school I had another teacher, and she gave us a totally different feeling . . . Everyday she would give us a newspaper article and lots of reading comprehension questions we had to answer . . . I don’t like this style of learning. My previous English teacher in middle school had gone abroad on an exchange program. Sometimes she would give us a newspaper article, but she would talk about the things she encountered abroad, the differences between Chinese culture and foreign cultures. It was very interesting, very fresh. Through stimulating our own interest, in this kind of lively environment we can learn English and get a feeling for English culture . . . so because of this experience I don’t really like test-based education.

Yifei was dissatisfied with what she perceived as “test-based education.” Coming from a relatively comfortable urban background, with parents who were government administrators, she did not view education as an avenue to social mobility. Because she began her education in the city’s top primary school, she only felt pressure from her parents not to “fall behind” rather than test into a more highly-

ranked school. Instead of facilitating social mobility, Yifei wanted her lessons to be “interesting, very fresh” and stimulate her “own interest.” As a student in an elite Chinese high school, she was able to come into contact with teachers who had lived abroad. Moreover, many of her peers planned to attend university in the West. Yifei heard her peers and some of her teachers talk about the differences between Chinese and Western education. It seemed to her that Chinese education taught students to conform to external standards, while Western education encouraged developing individual passions as well as creativity and exploration. She felt that going to a foreign university as an undergraduate would put too much of a financial burden on her parents. However, she decided to embark on a “journey of the self” by volunteering with an NGO after graduation from university rather than taking a more conventional path. She chose to root her identity in her ability to make independent choices rather than her success in conforming to external standards. Her privileged background facilitated her dissatisfaction with traditional Chinese education, exposed her to so-called “Western” models of identity, and provided her with the opportunity to practice autonomy through volunteering.

Yueling, another volunteer with Beautiful China, also explained how her antipathy toward her own schooling helped motivate her decision to volunteer to teach in the countryside:

At that moment [when I first learned about Beautiful China] I had no idea that I really liked teaching that much because I hadn't been on good terms with most of my teachers, especially from elementary school. Because in the traditional Chinese education system, the curriculum is kind of rigid and there's not that much place for the students or the teacher to manipulate. So everything has to be taught according to the textbook and most things are taught by memorizing and that kind of stuff. So that is why I hated school so much. Basically it was about my bad childhood experience. But at that moment I probably thought I could change something so I joined [Beautiful China] and I taught in a middle school in Yunnan for two years.

Both Yifei and Yueling were attracted to NGO volunteerism because it seemed to allow them opportunities to teach in the way they wished that they had been taught. Although they had gone to highly-ranked college preparatory schools, they resented these schools' test-based style of education. Thus, they were attracted to the possibility of making an impact on China's education by volunteering as

rural teachers. Moreover, they felt that their own independent personalities and elite university educations made them qualified to teach and inspire rural students in a way that rural teachers could not.

NGO volunteers were not only personally dissatisfied with the Chinese education system, they also blamed the “mechanization within Chinese education” for their poorer classmates’ decisions to drop out:

Classmates dropped out because their grades weren’t high enough. One reason is they didn’t work hard enough, another is the lack of educational resources. The difference between what we learned in the books and on the test is very big. Another reason is that Middle school classes are very boring. Also, the pressure of the test. So some students choose to go to trade school after middle school. But you can also see that studying in this time is very boring and uninteresting to students, so many students give themselves the label of “not smart.” So as far as I’m concerned, the context that volunteer teachers work within is not just about unequal distribution of resources, it’s also about mechanization within Chinese education, that education is not seen as a way to cultivate the whole person (Zhu Lirui, female, former volunteer with a liberal arts summer camp).

This NGO volunteer, who told me that her family was relatively well-off compared to her middle school classmates, downplays the “unequal distribution of resources,” and appears more concerned with the style of education in Chinese schools. She claims that volunteers should challenge the “mechanization within Chinese education” and promote the idea that education should “cultivate the whole person.” When asked why some students drop out, she blames the style of education rather than material inequalities. Thus, privileged students aligned their personal critiques of test-based education with the larger cause of educational equity.

#### *Meritocratic Utilitarians’ Embrace of Chinese Education as a Path to Mobility*

Volunteers from less privileged backgrounds typically spoke much more positively about their personal experiences with the Chinese education system. One Communist Youth League member attributed his ability to attend a top university to the high-quality, yet conservative, education he received in high school. When I asked him to describe his background, he emphasized the no-frills education he received and the values which were cultivated through this education:

During high school I went to a school outside my hometown because that kind of school is better than the one in my county town, the quality of the teachers is better, the education is of a higher level, so I chose to study there . . . it’s the number two school in

Huangshan city. The teachers here had very good qualifications, the teachers were all great. A characteristic of this school is that most of the students are from the countryside, and kids from the countryside really work hard, so my parents thought that in this environment I would be like them, I'd have a good environment. A characteristic of schools where rural students are in the majority is that in these schools studying is the top priority, nothing else is important, so in this kind of school everything is test-based education. As far as quality education (*suzhi jiaoyu*), it's not that the school lacked holistic education, but the qualities we cultivated were hard work, persistence, good character, and how to be a good person. But extracurricular activities were rare.

Interviewer: Were you satisfied with your high school experience?

Respondent: Very satisfied. If I didn't have this experience, maybe I wouldn't have the opportunity to come to Renmin University.

This respondent credits his high school's rigorous study environment, where "everything is test-based education," as allowing him to rise out of his rural background and attend one of China's most prestigious universities. Unlike students from wealthy urban family backgrounds, who viewed test-based education as "boring" and a "waste of time," this respondent was grateful for the social mobility which his education provided.

Moreover, this CYL member defined "holistic education" according to his own values, saying that although extracurricular activities at his school were rare, his school did not lack "holistic education." While volunteers from privileged backgrounds often defined "holistic education" as cultivating "well-rounded students" who are proficient in various arts and are acquainted with foreign cultures, this CYL member redefines "holistic education" to align with values he considers to be most important. Those values are not innovation and independence, but rather "hard work, persistence, good character, and how to be a good person."

#### *The Meritocratic Idealists: Social Mobility through "Opening One's Worldview"*

NGO volunteers who personally experienced social mobility through education also spoke positively of their educational experiences, but often for different reasons than CYL members. Yao Wenbing, who volunteered with Beautiful China in Guangdong, spoke of his experience as an outstanding student from a rural area:

Perhaps [why I chose to volunteer] has to do with my experience, that when I was small I lived in a very rural area, it was pretty much like the place where I taught with Beautiful China, but my grades were really good, and I went to the best junior and high school. To go to high school I had to leave my district and go to the city, and I felt that it totally changed my worldview. Our high school had a library and we were in the middle of the city, it just felt different, and after high school it was very natural for me to go to university.

Unlike the majority of Beautiful China volunteers whom I interviewed, Yao Wenbing partially grew up in a rural area. Yao Wenbing is different from most rural people, however, in that he achieved excellent grades and was therefore able to attend a prestigious high school. He appears to be a perfect example of meritocracy in action. This experience, though atypical for rural students, led Yao Wenbing to believe that education was an important conduit for social mobility and that he could help other rural students to achieve similar academic success. In contrast to CYL members, however, Yao Wenbing mainly praises his urban education for “totally changing his worldview,” rather than providing the skills necessary to do well on the university entrance exam. To Yao Wenbing, was not so much the lessons, but the presence of a library and being in the “middle of the city” which “just felt different” and led him to feel that it was “very natural” to continue to university. Thus, Yao Wenbing emphasizes that it was being able to access a broad array information and experiences which helped facilitate his social mobility.

Several volunteers told stories about their family members or relatives to emphasize that social mobility was possible through education. Qiu Shikai, who volunteered with Beautiful China in Yunnan, spoke of his father’s dramatic life story:

The second [reason I chose to join Beautiful China] is my father, I always tell people this, my father was adopted at a young age, and then in the village, that village was really crappy, and he didn’t know how to work hard and change his future, but luckily his adoptive father really encouraged him to study. My dad relied on himself to chop wood, and then with some money from his adoptive father he tested into a vocational school, started work, so I feel that education can really change your fate. If he was the same as others, just kept chopping wood, he would not have a way out. In China’s current situation he would have no way out, I think education changed his whole life path, and from this he gave me a very good educational environment. This gave me a strong impression.

Qiu Shikai believes that “in China’s current situation,” education is the only “way out” of a life of poverty. Qiu Shikai claims to “always tell people” his father’s story, and that it gave him a “strong



impression,” indicating that he has strong faith in the ability of education to change someone’s life, and perhaps feel an obligation to help others to succeed through education. According to Qiu Shikai, his father’s success required his father’s adoptive father’s encouragement to study, as well as his father’s decision not to be “the same as others,” which led him to attend vocational school rather than “just keep chopping wood.” Thus, not only does Qiu Shikai attribute his father’s success to education and hard work, but also to his father’s willingness to make an independent decision to do something different from the people around him. Qiu Shikai also emphasizes that his father’s hard work and choice to pursue education allowed him to create a “very good educational environment” for Qiu Shikai. Thus, Qiu Shikai ties his own educational success to his father’s efforts. Qiu Shikai implies that education provided a means for a meritocratic rise out of poverty which he himself benefits from.

#### *Individualist Idealists Turning Away from the Communist Party Life*

All of the respondents who complained about their own educational experiences chose to join NGO volunteer programs rather than a government-sponsored program and none of them expressed any desire to join the Communist Party. Conversely, respondents in the Communist Youth League, who generally reported more positive educational experiences, saw no reason to become involved with NGOs. Ironically, however, many of the NGO volunteers’ parents were government officials or worked in state enterprises. Indeed, these respondents’ politically-privileged family backgrounds actually motivated them to turn away from the Communist Party.

Wang Yuan, a DreamAction volunteer in his late 30s, knew from an early age that he wanted nothing to do with the Communist Party. Yuan’s parents were both administrators in the national ministry of railways. As a result, nearly everyone in Yuan’s family, including extended family, worked for this ministry. He described the railway ministry as an “enclosed community” which separated its members from the wider world. According to Yuan, life in the ministry was “stable,” but also “routine, boring, predictable, straight and narrow.” While growing up, Yuan saw the same people every day and everyone seemed to know each other. Every teacher, classmate, cafeteria worker, doctor and nurse Hope came into contact with was a member of the railway ministry. Even Yuan’s youth basketball league was composed

entirely of the children of railway employees. Yuan's brother, like every other young person in his neighborhood, knew exactly what they would do after they graduated high school: take over the job of their parents (*jieban*). Yuan felt suffocated by this micromanaged environment and longed to escape. In middle school, while all of his classmates were writing a required essay about why they wanted to join the Communist Party, Yuan refused to write a single character. Yuan's teachers talked to his father and said they would give him another chance, but Yuan continued to refuse to make even the most minimal steps toward becoming an official party member. When Yuan graduated from college he went to work for a private enterprise and he is currently an executive in a foreign-owned company.

Like many NGO volunteers, Yuan's parents are administrators in the Communist Party but Yuan himself is not even a Communist Party member. It was Yuan's early position of privilege within the party, as the child of administrators who benefited from the "iron rice bowl" of a government job, which created an environment so "stable" that he found it insufferable. While most of Yuan's peers, including his brother, were happy to continue living "in the party" (*dangnei*), Yuan valued independence and adventure more than stability and prestige. Furthermore, Yuan built his own identity upon being more independent, courageous, and self-reliant than people in the Communist Party. Like Yuan, most NGO volunteers tended to highly value individual choice and think of themselves as more independent than their peers.

NGO volunteers often prized the principle of individual self-reliance. One NGO volunteer rejected the civil worker path her parents had planned for her because she instead wanted a job where she would be rewarded for her individual ability. In contrast to the CYL member, who valued being a member of a much larger powerful organization, the NGO volunteer claimed that she wanted to work in a job where relationships with others did not matter. This NGO volunteer, like the other NGO volunteers I interviewed, said that she was primarily motivated by a desire to express herself, in this case through her abilities, while some CYL members claimed that they were primarily motivated by a desire to "serve the people."

Interviewer: When did you stop thinking about being a civil worker?

Respondent: Because my parents have their connections, so I know what life in government is like, it's actually not that relaxed, it has difficulties of its own. In Chinese society, reputation and connections (*guanxi*) are the most important, so a lot of things are not based on your ability, or on whether something is right or wrong, and not about whether something is advantageous or effective; it's all about your connections. I don't like these kind of politics, and after I studied law I realized that China's law isn't really useful, perhaps it's very different from law in the United States. Right now I have a lot of friends who are lawyers, and many times political connections will determine how something is decided, so I don't really like this aspect. I don't want things to be decided by relationships with people rather than my own ability.

The fact that this respondent's parents "have their connections" provided her with an insider's view of life as a civil worker. Thus, it was her parents' political privilege which facilitated her own disillusionment with government work.

Guo Yuping, who volunteered with Beautiful China, provides an extreme example of this process of disillusionment. Over lunch, she explained to me how she went from viewing the Communist Party as her "family" to seeing it as an essentially corrupt institution. She told me she joined Beautiful China partly out of a sense of wanting to give something back in return for the help her family received from a lawyer working pro bono. Her mother was framed by the boss of the hospital where she worked because she refused to write *jiazhang* (fake accounts and invoices). A pro bono lawyer helped her mother to avoid being put into jail.

Before her mother was framed, her father was framed. Her father is in the Chinese military. Until Yuping was 10, her life was very comfortable. Her father's *tongzhi* (comrades) were like a big family. The door to her house was literally always open, and family friends, all associated with the military, would constantly come and go. When facing any difficulty, they always had a large network of powerful contacts to rely on. However, as Yuping described it, when she was about 10 years of age her father's colleagues started taking bribes. Her father, a man of integrity, refused to take bribes. This made him dangerous to his comrades, so they framed him and he had to go to jail for a while. Furthermore, all of the family's old friends, whom they had been close with, all stopped associating with them. Yuping

remarked, “We always kept our door open back then. Nowadays, no one would keep their door open. People just care about making more money.” This experience drastically changed Yuping’s view of the Communist Party. She used to believe that the Party was great, and was the rightful leader of Chinese people. However, “everything changed after that.” Yuping says, “I still believe in socialism, but I don’t believe in socialism in China . . . the only thing that matters in China now is power. If you have power you can get away with anything.” While Yuping’s family suffered far more than other powerful Communist Party families, Yuping’s disillusionment with the Party was made possible by her initial embeddedness within the Party.

In contrast to what some of my Communist Youth League respondents insisted, volunteers did not join NGOs because they lacked the ability or opportunities to succeed within the Communist Party or the government. Rather, NGO volunteers often came from families with powerful political connections. NGO volunteers’ own insider views of the Party led to their disillusionment with the Party and their decision to volunteer in NGOs rather than pursue careers “in the system.”

*NGO and Communist Party Volunteers Temporarily Turning Away from Consumerism and Careerism*

To many volunteers, volunteerism represents an alternative to the consumerism stereotypically associated with Chinese young adults. Huifang, the 23-year-old president of DreamAction, told me that finding DreamAction felt like “finding home.” In part, it was because Huifang came from a wealthy family that she was uninterested in materialist talk and the direct pursuit of wealth. Her mother had grown up poor but had managed to achieve wealth through hard work. She constantly pressured Huifang to achieve higher grades in school so that she could one day attain a high-paying job, but Huifang did not share her mother’s utilitarianism. Having grown up wealthy, Huifang could not be purely motivated by the pursuit of wealth. Instead, she embarked on a quest for personal meaning, first attempting to become a musician and then devoting herself to volunteerism. Although Huifang moved to the United States around the age of 12 and was an American citizen, she continued to associate mainly with ethnically Chinese friends. Huifang told me that most overseas Chinese students at her Midwestern university in the United

States seemed obsessed with shopping, name brands, and making money. DreamAction was attractive to her because it was an organization of overseas Chinese students who didn't talk about "material things." Instead, this group pursued more meaningful goals, such as helping others and working well as a team. Huifang's rejection of materialist talk was not necessarily accompanied by a rejection of material privilege, however. After several years of working for DreamAction she decided to pursue an M.B.A., though she claims that she will use her knowledge to help non-profit organizations become self-sustaining.

Several expressed that, in contrast to some of their peers, making a lot of money was not their main priority. Zou Yueling, who continues to work in the non-profit sector, spoke of how her privileged background influenced her decision to volunteer:

Interviewer: Do you think you always had a special interest in public service or was it about trying something new?

Zou Yueling: That's a good question. I've been asking myself for a long time. I think one of the reasons was I did like trying something new. And another reason is I don't like money that much. And basically I don't think I'm good at making money so I think it's kind of natural for me to think of something that's not related to profit, so then the non-profit sector.

Interviewer: Why do you think you're not interested in money?

Zou Yueling: For one thing, I don't think I need that much money to make myself happy. And the second thing is that although my family is well-off, but not that rich, but definitely I don't need to . . . I don't know how to explain that, it's just that kind of feeling, I don't need to, I don't have a high level of need for money. I don't need to buy many branded stuff and things and I don't care about whether I look fancy and have some fancy stuff and things. On the other hand, my dad and mom, it's like in my family there's a culture of spending money when we want. Just like that, and we don't save that much. And we just spend to make a happy life, that's just the story, and growing up in a family like that I don't have that strong sense of making money or earning that much for the future.

Zou Yueling was uncharacteristically frank among my respondents in that she directly admitted that her family was "well-off." On some occasions I heard volunteers teasing each other by arguing who among them was the real "*fu er dai*" (second-generation rich). Although respondents certainly varied in their parents' levels of wealth and political influence, they felt financially secure enough to eschew white-

collar work and teach for the meager salary of a rural teacher, or in the case of short-term volunteers, neglect to apply for summer jobs and internships and instead spend a considerable amount of money on transportation to NGO training locations and volunteer sites during their summer vacations. Thus, volunteers' wealthy backgrounds allowed them to eschew the frantic pursuit of wealth and instead pursue volunteerism, which seemed enjoyable, meaningful, and perhaps personally advantageous in the long run.

### **How Volunteers' Proclaimed Values Shaped Their Objectives as Volunteers**

Despite being similarly privileged, CYL members and NGO volunteers arrived at their program sites with distinct experiences and identities. Their experiences and identities influenced how they chose to volunteer within these sites.

Volunteers for educational NGOs emphasized to me that their primary goal was not to raise test scores. Instead, they wanted the children to “enjoy learning,” “have dreams,” “have zeal for life,” “gain self-knowledge,” “learn creativity,” “learn to think critically,” “make good choices,” and “think of themselves as individuals.” The goals these Chinese volunteers had for the children they taught mirrored their goals which they had for their own lives. None of the NGO volunteers had chosen to join the Communist Party after finishing their undergraduate studies, claiming that party membership would restrict their freedom to think independently, express themselves, and travel abroad. Furthermore, many of these volunteers viewed their volunteerism as a chance to step off of the life course that had been planned for them by their parents and society and figure out what career and lifestyle fit their own talents and personality. They lamented that Chinese society did not allow young people the freedom to find their own way. Thus, they hoped to find their own way through volunteering, while encouraging their young students to “follow their dreams” rather than imitate the paths of their parents.

CYL members and NGO volunteers had different ideas about how to motivate their students. CYL members would emphasize the utilitarian objectives of education, such as finding a well-paying job. NGO volunteers, on the other hand, would often try to help students find ways to enjoy the process of

learning itself. What volunteers actually did was often unrelated to the official goals of their respective volunteer organizations.

Although the NGO volunteers and CYL members both emphasized individual deficiencies among the poor, they differed somewhat in how these deficiencies could be ameliorated. NGO volunteers felt that their poor rural students lacked “self-knowledge” and the ability to make good choices for themselves, and therefore felt that the education system should allow students to “discover their own talents,” “develop their creativity,” “find joy in learning,” and “teach students how to think.” CYL members, on the other hand, saw no need for this kind of “progressive” education. They themselves had succeeded through the traditional Chinese education system, and they had few complaints about their own academic experiences. As one CYL member put it, “Critical thinking is useless for middle school students. It will only confuse them and make them do badly on the test. We should wait until university to teach critical thinking.” Rather than focus on curriculum reform, CYL members were most disturbed by rural teachers’ lack of professionalism and by their students’ lack of effort. Rather than try to make learning enjoyable, one CYL member recounted how she tried to motivate her rural middle school students through fear:

I told the boys, “You think you’re having fun now and you like making money at the factory, but ten years from now what kind of girl is going to want to marry a factory worker? Do you think any pretty girl will marry someone who dropped out of school and will spend the rest of their lives working at a factory? No, they’ll marry the person who studied hard and who got a good job.” The boys were all quiet when I told them this. It had a big effect on them. Then I told the girls, “The same goes for you. Do you think a rich man will want to marry a girl who has no education?”

This CYL member, like the NGO volunteers, emphasized personal responsibility for one’s future success and tried to help her students make “good choices.” Unlike the NGO volunteers, however, CYL members had no problem framing the purpose schooling in utilitarian terms. It was perfectly fine for students to view their studies as a path to wealth. Unlike the NGO volunteers, the CYL members did not believe the existing education system needed to become more student-centered. Rather, they felt that the poor needed to work harder within the existing system.

CYL members, perhaps because of their affiliation with the state, were less likely than NGO volunteers to blame unequal distribution of resources for the poor academic performance of their students. NGO volunteers also acknowledged that unequal distribution of resources existed. However, when I asked them how educational inequality nobody talked about redistribution of resources. Rather, they talked about developing China's non-profit sector, diversifying educational choices to include more specialty schools and varieties of entrance exams, and developing technology which would allow rural students to access the same educational resources as urban students. When discussing how to improve China's educational system, the key words for NGO volunteers were "diversity," "choice" and "technology." CYL members, on the other hand emphasized "standardization." They maintained that rural teachers needed more training and supervision so that they would adhere to the same standards as urban teachers. Furthermore, several CYL members expressed support for standardizing the college entrance exam, which is currently different for each province. NGO volunteers, on the other hand, usually opposed homogenizing the exam, believing that this would make the "mechanization" of the Chinese education system even worse.

### **Discussion: The Privileged Habitus of Volunteers**

NGO volunteers' privileged backgrounds motivated and allowed them to temporarily reject traditional career paths. Thus, volunteerism is one way in which privilege can be obscured: Privileged people are more likely to volunteer, and some may even volunteer to advance their own careers, yet they and others often perceive their volunteerism as arising from personal qualities such as autonomy, altruism and patriotism.

Furthermore, volunteers' backgrounds helped to shape their values and identities, which corresponded to their goals as volunteers. Volunteers wanted to teach their students the same qualities and goals the volunteers envisioned for themselves. NGO volunteers tended to value autonomy, and believed that students should pursue post-materialist goals such as self-actualization, while Communist Youth League volunteers valued discipline and hard work, and believed that students should aspire toward high-



paying careers. As the next two chapters will show, when the aspirations and strategies of rural students appeared to diverge from those of volunteers, NGO volunteers framed rural people as lacking autonomy and ambition.

### CHAPTER 3:

#### **BUILDING AND OBSCURING BOUNDARIES: TALKING LIKE A GOOD VOLUNTEER**

Organizers of volunteer activities often claim that volunteerism not only provides aid to communities in need, but also provides volunteers with a valuable learning experience. Volunteers are expected to learn social responsibility, civic skills and appreciation for diversity. When volunteers are young and come from privileged backgrounds, promoters of volunteerism claim that these privileged youths will continually draw upon the memories, knowledge, and relationships gained through volunteerism to make positive impacts on society far beyond the scope of the volunteer project itself.

A wide body of research, however, challenges the assumption that volunteerism promotes greater understanding of social problems or leads former volunteers to initiate larger structural changes. Several studies found that although some volunteers express greater understanding of structural causes of poverty after volunteering, they are no more likely to believe that poor people face limited opportunities to escape poverty (Hollis 2004), and they are no more likely to support policies which would reduce poverty or homelessness (Seider 2011). McAdam's study of Teach for America teaching fellows (McAdam and Brandt 2009) found that fellows who finished their two-year commitment were actually less politically engaged than applicants who declined to participate and fellows who left the program before their two years were up.

Researchers have found that individual volunteers agentially engage in a variety of rhetorical strategies in order to maintain their views that poverty and inequality are legitimate, natural or generally acceptable phenomenon (Nenga 2011; Seider 2011). These rhetorical strategies include evading recognition of class, explaining inequality as a result of differential luck, and blaming cultural capital (Nenga 2011). When volunteers do talk about the need for social change, they tend to "fetishize the local" (Carpenter 2015) by holding small communities responsible for their own "development" and encouraging neighborhood-level civic cooperation while discouraging or omitting political mobilization at any level. On the other hand, some volunteer projects appear to significantly influence participants'

political attitudes and actions in support of social justice (Yates and Youniss 2008; Seider, Gillmor, and Rabinowicz 2011; Seider, Rabinowicz, and Gillmor 2011).

These studies of volunteerism's effect on attitudes reveal that volunteerism does not always lead to "justice-oriented citizenship" (Swalwell 2013). However, as most of these studies rely upon interviews and survey data, they are limited in several ways. Firstly, because these studies only measure outcomes, we still know little about the processes within volunteer programs which change or reinforce participants' attitudes and behavior. Secondly, there is often a difference between what people say and what they do. (Khan and Jerolmack 2013). Thus, I conducted both participant observation and in-depth interviews in order to better understand how volunteers both talk about and engage in volunteerism within a social context. This allowed me to discover processes in which volunteerism reproduces both social and symbolic boundaries between people of varying levels of privilege. Inequality is legitimized when volunteers promote a style of talk (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) which discourages discussion of social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and therefore hides inequality of opportunity between volunteers and clients; and construct narratives which assume implicit symbolic boundaries between volunteers and clients. Ironically, the ways in which volunteers respond to social justice critiques of volunteerism can legitimate inequality. In response to social justice critiques, volunteers appear to make conscious and explicit efforts to eliminate prejudicial thinking and "power imbalances" between volunteers and clients. The result, however, is that privileged volunteers and NGO staff discourage discussion of structural boundaries *in the name* of egalitarianism and empowerment. At the same time, they create and maintain symbolic boundaries by constructing narratives which assume that rural people are culturally deficient and require a change in mindset.

### **Embracing Post-Materialism**

Volunteers took pride in their organization's emphasis on spiritual growth as opposed to material equality. One co-founder of DreamAction told me that "We Chinese are a spiritual people in search of an

organization.” He envisioned DreamAction as more than a charitable organization. It was a place where people could embark on a shared journey for meaning and promote the “spirit of volunteerism.”

Volunteers rejected a rationalistic, utilitarian view of their organization. In a homework assignment in preparation for the weekly online training sessions, one volunteer, who was also involved in fundraising for DreamAction at his American university, seemed to take pride in the volunteers’ lack of interest in measurable outcomes of fundraising and volunteer work, writing in a training assignment:

I don't like to use this word charity to describe what we're doing, and I don't want to complicate a simple thing. As far as this matter is concerned, the most important thing is the heart and objective of the volunteers. This word “charity” sounds too empty and too big. It makes one think of a rich businessperson giving a charitable donation after completing a project, like it's a duty, like he feels that if you have money then donating money is a kind of payment to society . . . In DreamAction chapter work, every time we collect some donations, and give to the head office, we won't think much about whose pocket this is going into, and we won't worry about where the money is spent, this is a true attitude of charity. To persist with simplicity, passion, and humility, this is enough.

This volunteer maintained that the “most important thing is the heart and objective of the volunteers” rather than “where the money is spent.” Another volunteer told me that when she goes to corporations and big donors asking for money for the NGO, their questions about DreamAction’s budget and accomplishments make her sick. She explained that she was disgusted with their perspective because they only want quantitative evidence of improvement in the children’s test scores and did not care about the children’s psychological and spiritual development. According to these volunteers, volunteerism and donating money was only “true” and “simple” if it did not calculate observable costs and benefits, including costs and benefits to the local rural populations. Moreover, just as an aforementioned volunteer rejected the notion of a “rich businessperson” giving a “payment to society” as a “duty,” volunteers eschewed the language of “obligation.” Most volunteers told me that no wealthy person should feel obligated to give to charity, for this violated the principle of individual freedom.

Each week, DreamAction leaders required volunteers to read several essays and complete homework questions about those essays. One of those essays was “To Hell with Good Intentions,” a transcript of a speech given in the 1960s by a Catholic priest, Ivan Illich, who railed against “vacationing

do-gooders” from the United States who went to Mexico as volunteers (Illich 1968). The priest claimed that these “middle-class” volunteers did more harm than good because they served as walking advertisements for American materialism and imperialistic policies. Furthermore, with their limited Spanish, these volunteers couldn’t even understand how unwanted they were by the local population. These volunteers would be better off staying in the United States and joining the civil rights movement. Hence, the speech was a warning for middle-class Americans against arrogantly “helping” people in Third World countries without fully understanding the implications of doing so. This kind of “help” was not only harmful, but hypocritical, for there was an important civil-rights movement going on in the middle-class Americans own country. Ironically, considering that the title of the speech was “To Hell with Good Intentions,” many DreamAction volunteers distinguished themselves from the targets of Illich’s speech by claiming that their own intentions were sincere.

At the end the week in which volunteers were asked to read and reflect upon the essay “To Hell with Good Intentions,” a Chinese anthropology professor from an American liberal arts college led that week’s online training session. She began by broadly addressing “inequality”:

In fact, everyone has some thoughts on these questions, especially in regards to whether you are vacationing do-gooders, and how can this term encompass everyone’s different ways of thinking. My own feeling about this is that although this essay is written in 1968, from today’s perspective it is very connected to power relations, and the respect we show to others in the volunteer activity, and also the limits of our volunteer work, mainly because in comparison with today’s situation, the unequal structures which our world faces, and the problems our society faces remain essentially the same, especially cross-cultural and cross-strata volunteer activities. Just as the author said there is a big possibility of bringing a lot of influence and harm to the local area, naturally in addition to some positive influence, this harm is important to talk about.

First I want to say a few things, the power relations and the structural inequality we are facing, it is very simple, we can think of a very simple principle. Actually, inequality as well as the unbalanced development of society, this is the precondition for the existence of charity or public benefit programs. If these negative things didn’t exist we wouldn’t have a need for charity, correct?

The anthropologist acknowledged that unequal power relations existed between volunteers and people in the “program location” (*xiangmu dian*). However, she then went on to say that the “power relations” and “structural inequality” were simply a fact of life. This implied that because we all know that these

inequalities exist, the inequalities themselves do not require any further description or inquiry. The anthropologist also mentioned “inequality” and “the unbalanced development of society” together, possibly conflating the two. Framing inequality as “unbalanced development” precludes a relational perspective on inequality and instead implies that certain areas are simply not as “developed” as others but will eventually catch up. Similarly, volunteers often attributed growing inequality to “globalization,” yet maintained that this “trend of globalization” could not be stopped, only managed.

### **Blurring Boundaries between Volunteers and Clients**

As volunteerism in China has rapidly grown in popularity in the past ten years, so too have criticisms of volunteers. Many of these criticisms are generated or propagated by former volunteers themselves as they reflect on the missteps of their own volunteerism and as NGOs seek to distinguish themselves from other organizations. The rapid proliferation of volunteer organizations causes the various organizations to compete for donors, members, and status, which further encourages their attempts to frame themselves as superior to the rest. When I told the leaders or founders of volunteer organizations that I was also researching a number of similar organizations, they commonly responded with dismissive comments such as, “Oh, that organization that build libraries? There’s so many organizations like that now,” or “I’m not sure about them—how much can they really accomplish by just teaching for two years?”

Within the volunteer organizations’ training sessions, leaders presented volunteers with publically available essays which critiqued a certain kind of volunteerism or the non-profit sector in general. Volunteers were asked to reflect upon whether they resembled the negative examples of volunteers in the critiques, and how they would avoid the shortcomings of those volunteers. Volunteer leaders also continually emphasized that their particular organization was different from the kind of organizations named in the critiques. Chinese NGO leaders often distinguished their NGO from “Western NGOs” and claimed to support the idea of “volunteerism with Chinese characteristics.”

*“We Are All Chinese”*

By emphasizing that volunteers and clients shared a common Chinese identity, Chinese volunteers dismissed popular criticisms of volunteerism and downplayed the importance of addressing inequality between volunteers and clients. Although the anthropologist addressed parallels between the American volunteers named in Illich’s essay and the Chinese DreamAction volunteers, she soon dismissed the significance of these parallels:

Much of what I talked about are some negative things we need to be on the alert for, but regarding this essay, I think we should see, because this essay was written a long time ago, so today’s historical conditions and public benefit environment have changed a lot. Public benefit organizations, especially, have grown on a global scale, and because we know, because of the development of globalization at that time the gap between the American middle class and Mexican villagers was a huge chasm, and perhaps the gap between the city and countryside in China is not as big, so the shock we experience won’t be as big.

The professor did acknowledge that inequality existed between volunteers and the rural people with whom we would be working. However, this professor also downplayed the importance of this inequality by claiming that present conditions are better than those of the past, and that inequality between Chinese volunteers and rural Chinese people could not be as large as the inequality between middle-class Americans and rural Mexicans.

Several volunteers distanced themselves from Americans to show that their own volunteerism was noble and free of harmful consequences:

Because my English reading ability is limited, I’m not sure if my understanding of “vacationing do-gooders” is the same as Illich’s. What he mainly referred to in his speech is Americans’ sense of superiority, their thinking that they should impose their ideas on others, their inflated heroic pride (in my view, this is the most obnoxious aspect of Americans), which negatively influences the local people or has no influence at all. Regarding “vacationing do-gooders,” this term in itself, I don’t think there is any problem. Speaking for myself, I am indeed using my summer holiday to do “charitable acts.”

The discourse of shared Chineseness was not limited to DreamAction. A Chinese philosophy professor who came to speak to PAL volunteers about interacting with rural people advised us to “let your Chinese heart communicate with their Chinese heart.” Although this professor was loosely associated

with China's pro-communist "new left," his advice implied that Chinese people share a primordial bond which can overcome regional differences. Both DreamAction and PAL are volunteer organizations which explicitly draw inspiration from the United States and which count many overseas Chinese students among their members. Nevertheless, they drew upon an essentialist Chinese identity and distanced themselves from Americans, and more broadly "westerners," in order to deflect criticism.

In fact, "westerners" themselves were sometimes the source of these essentializing discourses. A portion of our training manual, which was written by a white Canadian DreamAction volunteer, minimized class differences by pointing to the shared ethnicity of most volunteers.

What DreamAction does that may help to reduce power imbalances:

DreamAction was founded by Chinese in North America. The perspective of DreamAction involves social responsibility and using one's privileged position to contribute to equitable development in rural regions in China . . .

Volunteers are predominantly of Chinese descent. There would be much more power dynamics [sic] to consider if the team were made up mostly of White people, who are predominantly seen in international development projects...

Volunteers speak Mandarin. This helps to reduce the power imbalances because the Mandarin speakers have a better understanding of "Chinese" culture and can communicate easily. There is no need for translation...

As privileged Chinese seek to understand and deal with rising inequality within China, they often look "west" for perspectives and solutions. This is especially true for the young volunteers whom I came into contact with, many of whom attended North American universities or maintained friendships with those who had. Western conceptions of race and nationality often reinforced Chinese volunteers' tendency to use their Chinese identity to obscure domestic inequalities.

### *The Virtue of Ignoring Inequality*

The inequality between volunteers and clients could not always be easily dismissed. Thus, NGO members enforced a style of talk which attached moral value to *consciously ignoring* inequality. During the training session, the anthropology professor discussed how to deal with the obvious inequality which existed between volunteers and clients:



So many times we expect to change this world, we expect to do some good things, but we usually create some side effects. That is to say that we first remind, we go and confirm, especially with the local people and children we confirm that this kind of inequality exists, so in this we touch on some very sensitive matters relating to how we should give consideration to the local people's expectations and reactions. So in addition to this essay, Li Shi's essay also touches on this question, and her criticism is very pointed.

She also discusses how this kind of thing could bring harm to local people. Actually this is a very simple matter, when we think about the related pictures we have come across, sometimes when I arrive at a place with some volunteers, the local place is very different from their own life, so they take out their camera and take pictures of the local people and the scenery. I think this is a very simple and frequent matter that is often overlooked, but I think that as far as local people are concerned this isn't a very comfortable thing for them.

The anthropology professor's suggestion for dealing with inequality was to avoid drawing attention to inequality. She maintained that the presence of the volunteers in the countryside could have some negative "side effects" because "local people and children" would be reminded that "inequality exists" between them and the volunteers. However, dealing with this inequality was actually just a "simple matter." The professor suggested that volunteers avoid this possible "harm to local people" by acting as if the inequality between volunteers and local people simply did not exist. Thus, she warned volunteers against taking too many pictures of the "local pictures and scenery," as this would supposedly draw attention to the inequality between volunteers and locals. At the same time, DreamAction's public relations officer asked each volunteer team to take at least one hundred pictures a day while at the project sites so that the "best" of these pictures could be used for official documentation and promotion. Careful to avoid taking pictures that explicitly showed poverty, volunteers mainly took pictures of children reading donated books, or smiling with the volunteers.

The volunteer training manual taught that the "power imbalances" between volunteers and local people could be "minimized" through symbolic gestures:

In the past volunteers have recognized and have done things to minimize power imbalances—e.g. drinking well water to show "they are one of the people", not using hand sanitizer in front of students, avoiding activities such as teaching English (so as not to take over the teachers' jobs). Instead, informal activities are used to teach English.

Pay attention to how much you use the words “they” or “them” instead of the community’s name or the person’s name, and how often or how you use the words “exotic” or “interesting.”

Volunteers conspicuously displayed to other volunteers that they had put themselves on an “equal platform” with rural people. During the volunteer project, one volunteer proudly posted a photo of herself and three other volunteers on WeChat. The photo showed the volunteers picking up trash around a rural school with the caption: “We are just like trash collectors, except that trash collectors get paid and we are doing this for free!”

Volunteers tried to evade talk of class differences when interacting with rural people. When rural people remarked to volunteers that “Things are much nicer in the cities, aren’t they?” the volunteers, without fail, would answer along the lines of “Oh no, the city is so polluted.” At the volunteer project wrap-up session, one volunteer recounted that, “When we arrived [the local people] said, ‘Oh, you are *fuerdai* (second-generation rich),’ and we explained to them that we’re not.” Volunteers conspicuously displayed their egalitarianism by downplaying differences in privilege during cross-class interaction.

This is not to say that rural people would have preferred that the volunteers acknowledge the huge difference in privilege between them. Rather, conversations between local people and volunteers often seemed to flow more smoothly after volunteers engaged in some praise of the countryside and deprecation of city life. On the few occasions when I acknowledged my privilege to rural people they seemed to think I was boasting and being arrogant, or they responded by making an effort to reduce the apparent distance in privilege between us.

On the other hand, on the few occasions when I observed rural people angrily ranting to volunteers about discrimination toward rural people or explain that they were too poor to send their children or grandchildren to college, volunteers appeared uncomfortable and did not further discuss these experiences with each other. Volunteers had been taught to avoid talking about structural and material inequalities. Not only did they believe that ignoring inequality between urban and rural people was a sign of a positive, egalitarian attitude, they also felt that they should only talk about things which made

individuals feel empowered, such as finding one's dream or pursuing a creative hobby. Talking about large structural inequalities seemed to minimize the power of the individual, and was therefore discouraged.

After the volunteers returned to Beijing from one month of volunteering in the countryside, they assembled once more for a two-day "wrap-up session," held in the conference rooms of an international company where one of the few middle-aged volunteers was an executive. In the last speech of the wrap-up session, DreamAction's public relations officer, a Chinese citizen in her fourth year at a highly-ranked American university, spoke to the volunteers about how they should talk to people about their experience in DreamAction. "Don't talk about how poor or pitiful the children were and how they really need help. That doesn't reflect our values. Instead, talk about how they were empowered." Thus, DreamAction leaders instructed volunteers to think of rural people as agents "empowered" by volunteers, and implied that talking about rural poverty was condescending and antithetical to the organization's goal of not merely recognizing, but also celebrating rural people's agency.

#### *Framing Class Differences as Cultural Differences and Encouraging Cultural Relativism*

After urging volunteers not to immediately take pictures of local people and scenery after arriving in the countryside, the anthropologist abruptly ended her discussion of "inequality" and moved on to discuss the importance of cultural relativism:

The second point is I think there is another problem, the problem of cultural differences. Oftentimes when we are volunteers, I think we should avoid labeling regional or lifestyle differences as good or bad. When we volunteers arrive at a project location we perhaps are not used to it, we think our own lifestyle is more comfortable, more modern, and even think it is more civilized, but I think in fact, from my professional perspective since I do anthropological research, this is an attitude really worth reconsidering, because sometimes local customs and values aren't essentially good or bad, sometimes because of the way we grew up, we will label them good or bad, so I think that in regards to this cultural difference between the self and others, I think that when we are in this volunteer program we should be sensitive and alert.

Rather than look at the structural conditions that create these differences between rural and urban "cultures," this anthropologist essentialized these "cultural differences" and urged us to avoid judging them as good or bad.

## **Blurring or Reinforcing Boundaries? Diversity versus Inclusion**

Volunteer discourses could simultaneously blur and reinforce boundaries between volunteers and rural people. This occurred when volunteers called upon the principles of diversity and individuality in a way which promoted inequality, naturalized inequality, or rendered inequality acceptable.

### *Framing Material Aid to Rural People as Harmful and Condescending*

One way volunteers simultaneously blurred and constructed boundaries between rural and urban people was by framing material aid to rural people as both harmful and condescending. In a homework assignment for a DreamAction training session, one volunteer wrote:

Subjectively, there shouldn't be these concepts of "helping" and "being helped." Volunteers are not "giving alms," and this is not only because the local community is not "begging." The two sides are equally cooperating in this project...As soon as volunteers accept the label of "helping others" and its accompanying "sense of superiority," he is unable to see the local problems objectively, and there will be a big gap with those being helped, which is not good for communication, and it's impossible to do the project well. And when the local community accepts a lowly attitude because of a psychology of "requesting help from others" (this is unlikely), they will be unable to effectively communicate with volunteers and there will be a negative effect.

Volunteers were also asked to read an article which stated:

What rural children need during the process of growing up is not any kind of material or money, but rather they need to be given enough respect so that they can maintain their dignity . . . No matter what you do, you must maintain mutual dignity, and only when this has a higher priority than any material interest will our [Chinese] race have true hope . . . You can imagine, if an adult receives something without working then this will lead to a habit of dependency. This is even more true for a child who has no ability to control their behavior. If a child suddenly receives a large sum of money without working, what kind of impact will this have on his future?

Granted, one can certainly make a reasonable case against "spoiling" children by giving them unlimited gifts and money. However, primarily discussing material aid to the poor in negative terms may reinforce a symbolic boundary in the form of a double standard. While the volunteers themselves had benefited from the considerable financial resources of their parents, they viewed material aid to the poor as being condescending and harmful. Thus, even as volunteers claimed to be reducing the "big gap" between the "two sides," they portrayed the poor as unable to properly handle material aid.

*Encouraging Rural People to “Stay and Develop their Hometowns”*

Another way in which volunteers simultaneously blurred and constructed boundaries was by promoting the idea that rural people should stay in rural areas. Volunteers often spoke of “cultivating rural children’s love for their hometown.” Was this objective motivated by volunteers’ desire to raise rural children’s self-esteem and promote regional equality, or was it motivated by a desire to keep rural people out of the large cities where most volunteers grew up or lived? Regardless of intent, some volunteers hoped to discourage rural youth from choosing to settle in large cities. Several volunteers explicitly told me that allowing rural people to move to the cities would lead to chaos and crime.

Many seemed to think that encouraging rural people to “love their hometown” would work in everyone’s favor. The cities would not be so crowded and endangered by the presence of migrant workers, and the countryside would become more “developed” because more people would choose to stay in their rural villages. As homework, DreamAction volunteers were asked to read an article which promoted this message:

Presently, the rural villages are indeed economically far behind the cities. Why is it that after 30 years of reform and opening, the rural villages are falling farther and farther behind? It is because the current education system gives rural children the idea that they should “leave the mountains” rather than build up their hometowns.

Many volunteers appeared to agree with the author, and used similar logic to argue against abolishing current policies which prevent rural people from settling in large cities. I also observed volunteers encourage rural students to move back to their hometowns after making some money so that they could “invest in” and “develop” the countryside. Some volunteers mentioned that rural people developed “psychological problems” after moving to the cities because they felt inferior to legal urban residents and were unable to resist the various “temptations” of the city. When a lone volunteer in DreamAction spoke in favor of teaching rural children about “big city” jobs, the other volunteers hissed under their breath and shot him a dirty look. A volunteer explained to me that the term “big city” often has a connotation of superiority, and claimed that this is why many volunteers refrained from using this term when discussing rural students. DreamAction volunteers, more so than Beautiful China volunteers, spoke as if encouraging

rural people to stay in or return to their hometowns reflected egalitarianism and benevolence. Moreover, they primarily critiqued rural-to-urban migration as a cause, not consequence, of inequality. If we assume that an urban *hukou* and proximity to urban institutions could provide rural people with more opportunities for social mobility, then repeatedly framing rural-to-urban migration in negative terms was one way in which volunteers legitimated social boundaries between rural and urban people, often while appealing to the principle of egalitarianism.

### *Framing Low-Paid Work as a Calling*

Li Huifang, DreamAction's president (and an American citizen since her teens), passionately recounted an essay to me which she had read about a street sweeper who loved her job and found abundant joy in keeping the streets clean in her city. Huifang explained to me that reading could help people to understand what kind of job they were best suited for, as well as help people to find meaning within any kind of job.

Huifang and other volunteers claimed that they focused on influencing the psychology of rural people because they did not think that actual social mobility was a realistic goal. They were aware of the vast differences in opportunity between them and their students, and they did not necessarily harbor hopes that their students would attend elite universities. Huifang explained:

For DreamAction, the goal is not to for them to go to a good college. It's like the professor here [in the United States], yeah, the girls in that hall, the girls with a really good family background, they became richer, they graduated with higher GPA, better jobs, and happier, and the girls from the lower level, they came out worse. So it's kind of the same in China. The resources are different. Very few of them can actually study hard and actually go to Beida, Tsinghua, maybe just point one percent, point zero five percent. So like for DreamAction the goal is not for all of them to go to Beida, Tsinghua, but to know there are other values outside the system, and if they don't go to Beida, Tsinghua they can still live with themselves. So we're not trying to impose the entire western way to the education system, but for them to realize other values in life and be able to live happily.

Huifang implied that rural people should not aspire to the same goals as urban people, but instead “realize other values in life.” Furthermore, she framed her thinking as according with Chinese characteristics: to

aim for absolute social mobility was a “western way” to approach education. Rural Chinese people, in her view, should learn to “be able to live happily” without going to a top university.

Volunteers repeatedly claimed that they viewed rural people as equals. On the other hand, many of these volunteers expressed opposition to material aid or the lifting of restrictions placed on people with rural *hukou*. Some claimed that equality of opportunity was an unrealistic goal for contemporary China, and sought to help rural people psychologically transcend poverty rather than escape it. Thus, through the discourses of equality, diversity and individuality, volunteers from privileged urban backgrounds found ways to justify their opposition to actions and policies which would significantly reduce inequality.

### **Implicit Boundaries**

Despite calling for “working together with local people on equal terms,” volunteers operated under the implicit assumption that rural people were culturally deficient. As much as NGO members talked about the importance of cross-cultural tolerance and emphasized that volunteers were “cooperating” with rural people rather than helping them, the primary goal of the volunteer activities was always to change rural culture or rural people’s psyches in some way.

DreamAction’s goal, for example, was to “cultivate the habit of reading.” Even when NGO leaders taught volunteers to be humble and listen carefully to the perspective of rural principals, teachers, and parents, they emphasized that through communicating in this way they could more effectively convince rural people to support the mission of DreamAction. Thus, showing humility and understanding was usually not the primary goal. Instead, DreamAction leaders encouraged listening to rural people in service of the fundamental goals of changing how rural parents raised their children and pushing rural schools from test-based education to more individualistic and humanistic education.

Education-related NGO leaders distinguish their organizations from other kinds of NGOs by claiming that while other organizations merely “give charity,” their own organization provides some intangible, yet “sustainable” quality, such as “empowerment.” DreamAction’s website, for example, called for volunteers by appealing to these intangibles:

Do you believe in:

- Diversity, understanding, and intercultural exchange?
- Empowerment through learning?
- Effecting change not by simply delivering goods but by investing in people?

If your answers are YES, then we strongly encourage you to apply.

DreamAction distinguished itself from other organizations by emphasizing that they do not simply deliver “goods,” but rather invest in “people.” Huifang, the president of DreamAction, highlighted this in her applications to top-tier M.B.A. programs in the United States. She gave me permission to quote her application essays in my research after I helped her to polish them. She wrote:

When I joined DreamAction in 2011, I quickly noticed the uniqueness of the program: when most nonprofits are just donating resources, DreamAction is focusing on putting the books to use . . . As I learned more about local nonprofits, I discovered that in China many organizations raise money by showcasing how desperate rural children are, but that’s not what DreamAction is about. Our program is about how local children are inspired to become doers, as opposed to just waiting for help. It’s about collaborating with local teachers as equals, as opposed to giving off a sense of superiority just because we are the ones born with resources.

DreamAction’s identity is centered around “how local children are inspired to become doers” rather than providing material aid. Thus, the focus of change is the mindset of “local children” rather than their material conditions. On the other hand, DreamAction did donate books and library equipment, in addition to sending volunteers to hold reading activities and visit local households.

In DreamAction, volunteer leaders and volunteers themselves continually distinguished themselves from *zhijiao*, a relatively well-known term in China which means “support teaching” and usually refers to urbanites who choose to teach in the countryside for a limited period of time. Even members of Beautiful China, which would seem to be a quintessential *zhijiao* organization, told me that the organization no longer uses the term *zhijiao* but instead aims to “cultivate leadership.”

According to some volunteers and NGO leaders, *zhijiao* organizations are arrogant, disruptive, and ineffective. They claimed that to be a *zhijiao* teacher is arrogant because *zhijiao* teachers are not professionally trained yet believe that simply because they have an elite college education they can be better teachers than local teachers. *Zhijiao* teachers are also disruptive because they interrupt the normal curriculum by temporarily taking over local teachers’ classes and using different teaching methods.



Finally, some volunteers and NGO leaders claimed that *zhijiao* organizations are ineffective since they cannot significantly raise students' test scores, and even if they do raise test scores they will drop again once the *zhijiao* teachers leave. DreamAction members were careful to distinguish themselves from *zhijiao*, and thus never used the term "teach," and only rarely used the term "education." Yet despite their attempts to distance themselves from the perceived arrogance of other volunteer teachers, DreamAction volunteers implicitly framed rural people as culturally deficient. They repeatedly emphasized that their primary goal was to "cultivate the habit of reading" in rural populations, which would lead to rural people's "empowerment."

Even the anthropology professor, who was invited to speak to DreamAction volunteers about "reducing the power imbalance" between volunteers and rural people, implied that volunteers should "shock" rural people into changing their routines. After telling volunteers that they should avoid offending rural people, she continued her lecture by positing that the "positive side" of volunteerism was that volunteers improved problematic rural educational systems through "break[ing] up their gridlock and format":

I think we can see that volunteer work fundamentally has a very positive side, because as we reflect on the limits and efficiency of volunteer work, we can avoid romanticizing our work, and at the same time avoid romanticizing the local village and local people. Because the village is not all beautiful, they aren't always as we imagined, they also lead normal lives. Especially regarding educational volunteers, their education system essentially has problems, has pressure, so our involvement will, to a degree, break up their gridlock and format. As far as the children are concerned these things are very liberating, very interesting, meaningful. As far as some children are concerned this will bring about a very positive change, so we should maintain our confidence, even if at times we feel that we are "vacationing do-gooders," but this is not a problem. Because we are bringing a shock to their lives and to the problematic system. This is my response to that first question about "vacationing do-gooders."

Thus, just moments after emphasizing the importance of cultural relativism, the speaker insisted that volunteers were doing something good for rural people by "bringing a shock to their lives and to the problematic system." This presented volunteers with a confusing message. On the one hand, volunteers were not supposed to criticize the culture of rural people or excessively notice their poverty. On the other

hand, volunteers were supposed to bring a “shock” to the rural education system and to “their lives.” The result, as I observed, was that while in groups with other volunteers, volunteers avoided talking about rural people’s poverty and how this poverty limited their options or affected their worldviews, but criticized rural parents and grandparents for not encouraging their children to study harder or read more books, and criticized rural teachers for not being open to “student-centered learning” and other supposedly beneficial “innovations.”

In their homework assignments, volunteers invariably stressed that they would avoid “looking down from on high” and arrogantly imposing their views on rural people. Nevertheless, they continued to believe in the importance of changing rural people’s “thinking and behavior”:

We are helping by expanding the worldview of the schools, teachers, and children and helping them to understand the importance and usefulness of reading. We are not world saviors, and we are not going to force our principles. Instead, we slowly use methods which the local people can accept to guide children to have a passion for and understanding of reading. Our responsibility is to be a catalyst, an auxiliary function, but the most important things are the children’s thinking and behavior. Volunteers need to deeply understand their own responsibility and DreamAction’s guiding principle, and should know how to use their ideals to guide the children. Aside from this, the most important thing is that volunteers act from their heart, they want to help the children, and don’t act out of their own interest. (DreamAction volunteer homework)

The implicit or explicit objective of changing the “thinking and behavior” of rural people was present in virtually every educational NGO I observed. When describing the relatively developed province of Guangdong, Beautiful China’s website blames both poverty and an overly materialistic local culture for students’ decision to leave school:

Although Guangdong Province has generally been at the forefront of the economic Our project school is located in Guangdong province’s undergarment manufacturing center, so as the saying goes, “Poor people’s children take charge of the household early,” and many students will voluntarily use their nights and weekends tending to their family’s “little business” or other chores. Beyond this, Chaozhou and Shantou people are known as the “Jews of Asia,” and valuing business is their traditional ideology. This causes a portion of students to quit school after graduating middle school and choose to go to work.

The organization's official discourse takes for granted that "education" is superior to "business." Thus, when local people chose business over education, organizational staff would reassure volunteers that this was a result of problematic local culture and "traditional ideology" rather than a rational choice made by independent individuals.

Beautiful China's website, in its description of the province of Yunnan, blames a lack of parental guidance and also implies deficiencies in the cultures of minority ethnic groups:

The southwest is not only an area of severe poverty, it is also a place where many minority ethnicities live (including Bai, Wa, Bulang, Dai, Yi, Hui, etc.). The local education system not only faces the challenges brought by society's economic gap, there are also cross cultural conflicts, language barriers, and other problems. Many families living in the project areas in Yunnan face severe economic pressure, and the family's labor has no choice but to go to the city to work to support the whole family. Thus, lacking the care of their parents, many children choose to drop out of school and go work. Many children in the project schools are solely raised by their grandparents.

The first few sentences of this passage from Beautiful China deemphasize the importance of poverty and emphasizes the importance of culture through the sentence structure of "not only . . . [but] also . . ." The passage frames minority ethnicity as problematic because of "cross-cultural conflict, language barriers, and other problems."

The passage also denies the agency of those young people who choose to work rather than go to school, claiming that they choose this path because they lack "the care of their parents." Their parents, in turn, are framed as victims of circumstance who have "no choice but to go to the city to work . . ." Thus, the decision to work is always presented as resulting from a lack of agency. Diagnosing work as a problem allows volunteer teachers to think of themselves as a solution. Volunteers assume that rural people are already able to make money on their own, but it is only through the guidance of volunteers that rural people can reach the proper goal of becoming educated.

Beautiful China's official literature and presentations did, however, mention that "resources" were unequally distributed, thus acknowledging a structural and material basis for educational inequalities. Beautiful China's website (Chinese version) prominently declares that 80% of students in

“developed cities” are “able to enter college,” while in “poor rural areas only 5% of excellent students can enter university.” The website goes on to state:

Where a child is born usually determines his educational future, and this determines his future life choices . . . [Rural children] access far fewer educational resources than their peers in the city . . . Beautiful China believes that educational inequality must be resolved. Therefore: Beautiful China’s long-term goal is to make every Chinese child, regardless of family background, able to access the same level of high quality education. Beautiful China’s impact model includes: 1. Sending excellent teachers to areas lacking educational resources. 2. Develop leaders who will struggle in the long term to resolve the problem of unequal distribution of educational resources.

Beautiful China’s official diagnostic frame is centered on unfairness, but the solutions put forth by Beautiful China’s leaders and volunteers were centered around the quality of people. The organization illustrates unfairness through statistics showing the gap between rural and urban educational attainment. The organization then vaguely states that “unequal distribution of educational resources” is the source of this gap, and prescribes “excellent teachers” as the organizations’ main solution. The website also explains that these “excellent teachers” are selected through a competitive step-wise process, designed to recruit “excellent university graduates” with “leadership ability, perseverance, and excellent communication skills.” A staff member told me that the organization tries to only select candidates from top-tier universities because this easily signals to donors that “we are a professional organization and our teaching fellows are capable.” Very few recruits had previous teaching experience, but many had held leadership roles within campus organizations. Beautiful China bestows its volunteers with the roles of “teacher” and “leader” and the competitive selection process helps convince volunteers that they are qualified for these roles.

During interviews, several Beautiful China volunteers told me that they were not interested in statistics about educational inequality and they felt that Beautiful China’s official goals were too grandiose. During their month-long training session, some Chinese volunteers would criticize this framing while talking with each other in backstage settings, such as shared hotel rooms. Rather than attempt to resolve “the unequal distribution of educational resources,” some volunteers told me during interviews that they had merely wanted to “inspire students to achieve their dreams,” or “develop their

potential.” Volunteers felt that, as graduates from elite universities, they could inspire students to pursue higher education, personal hobbies, or high-skilled jobs. Thus, volunteers diagnosed rural students’ lack of role models, ambition, and interest in education as the primary problems to be solved.

From the beginning of training, Beautiful China’s leaders and promotional materials framed its volunteers as “excellent,” while framing rural children as the victims of unequal distribution of educational resources, evidenced by their low college enrollment rates. While most volunteers acknowledged that inequality of educational resources was a problem, they diagnosed the primary problem as located within the rural children themselves: because of their underdeveloped rural culture and lack of role models, they were not sufficiently inspired or motivated to work hard to pursue their dreams.

Within the NGO training sessions, there were already differences between the NGO trainers’ goals and the volunteers own goals:

[The training leader] might say a very big goal, but actually during training we [volunteers] didn’t say anything very big, like changing education or changing the village, we just talked about what we wanted to change about the students and bring to our students (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China volunteer, male).

In contrast to training leaders, who wanted Beautiful China volunteers to become more aware of systemic inequalities in China and think about how they could reduce these inequalities, Beautiful China’s Chinese volunteers felt that learning about large-scale inequalities was pointless and redundant, and instead cared more about “what we wanted to change about the students.” According to Shi Xuelong, a recruiter and program manager for Beautiful China, many new volunteers do not actually identify with Beautiful China’s goal of “educational equity.” These volunteers resist teaching their students how to improve their test scores. Instead, they want to inspire their students to “pursue their dreams.” As a program manager, Shi Xuelong would motivate volunteers to improve students’ scores by framing the education system as a “game” that students had to play in order to go to college and pursue their dreams. Thus, for most volunteers, the goal was not simply to raise students’ test scores, but to change students’ lives by changing students’ mindsets. Specifically, volunteers felt that students needed to learn how to “dream.”

## Managing Contradictions

The volunteers' talk and behavior was filled with contradictions. Volunteers' eschewed "imposing ideas" on rural people and "looking down from on high," yet they spoke of themselves as role models for rural people and emphasized the need to "cultivate the habit of reading" in rural people and expand rural children's worldviews. Volunteers emphasized how they put themselves on "an equal platform" with rural people, yet when volunteers returned to Beijing after their one month in the countryside, many of them chose to celebrate the end of the project by dining at one of Beijing's most expensive restaurants. Volunteers taught rural people to "cherish their hometowns" and often opposed rural migration to the cities, yet the volunteers themselves posted photos of their own travels around the world on social media. Volunteers claimed that rural people had been misled by consumerism and simply followed trends, yet virtually all of the volunteers owned expensive mobile phones and laptop computers from the same few brands. Volunteers claimed that rural people should learn to discover their individual dreams, yet most volunteers' own career ambitions were limited to a few high-paying industries. On the rare occasion that volunteers purposely interrogated these contradictions or unwittingly made them obvious, they could be ignored or socially sanctioned. At other times, volunteers' use of irony, self-deprecation, and humor helped to smooth over or distract from these contradictions.

He Wangjin, a DreamAction co-founder in his mid-40s who had settled in the United States after completing graduate school about ten years earlier, posed a question on DreamAction's WeChat group chat: "How should we understand the meaning of *"mengxiang"* (dream) and who are we directing [this term] at?" A discussion between several DreamAction members soon followed:

Lin Xirui: It should be giving dreams to the children in the project locations. And at the same time fulfilling our aspiration to be volunteers?

He Wangjin: [Thumbs up emoticon]. Can a dream be given? Perhaps we can ask C.G., or the principals and teachers at the project locations.

Lin Xirui: Dreams are given. I have heard this from a student's mouth. Otherwise they don't know the direction of their dream.

He Wangjin: “Aspiration to be a volunteer” – What is this really? Where does this come from? This question perhaps is like asking “What is the meaning of life.” [big smile emoticon]. What is the direction of a dream? Or what should it be?

Lin Xirui: Most elementary school students’ dreams are without objectives (*manwumudi*) and furthermore will change at a moment’s notice. Our appearance with the books makes directionless dreams more concrete. I know there are some volunteers who want to do something for their homeland (*jiaxiang*) and there are some overseas volunteers who have been drifting for a long time and want to do something for China but don’t have an outlet. DreamAction allows them to fulfill their aspirations.

He Wangjin pointed out a problem posed by Lin Xirui’s description of the role of “dreams” in DreamAction’s activities: DreamAction’s identity was, at least on the surface, based upon the idea of “cooperation on an equal platform” rather than telling rural people what to think or do. Moreover, DreamAction members generally viewed the act of “giving” as condescending. Thus, it was problematic to say that the volunteers could “give dreams” to rural people. The conversation continued on WeChat throughout the course of the day. The participants seemed to reach consensus after one participant framed DreamAction’s activities as “cultural capital.” Rather than impose ideas on others, DreamAction was simply providing “capital” which rural people could use as they wished. Yet because this was “cultural” rather than material capital, DreamAction could continue to distance themselves from the “condescending” act of giving material aid.

To downplay the importance of any potential contradictions, volunteers used self-deprecation, irony, and humor:

He Wangjin: Cultural capital, in that case we can just donate books, why do we need volunteers?

Lin Xirui: Living culture. Haha.

Xiwen: Aren’t the skills of volunteers also a kind of cultural capital?

Lin Xirui: !

Chenguang: Let the esoteric debate tournament begin! (*shenao bianlunsai, kaishi*).

While the idea of providing “cultural capital” seemed preferable to “giving dreams,” framing volunteers as “living culture” seemed to imply that volunteers were superior to rural people, a way of thinking that

volunteers knew they were supposed to avoid. To avoid discord and smooth over contradictions, the participants in this discussion made extensive use of emoticons, exclamations, and, at times, downplayed the importance of the conversation by joking that it was “esoteric debate.” Participants who could rhetorically resolve contradictions received the praise of other volunteers. As the following passage from the WeChat conversation makes evident, this was true even when rhetorical resolutions relied upon unfounded assumptions and flimsy logic:

Nancy: I think that the meaning of “dream” is that, in a society where resources cannot be distributed absolutely equally, the most effective method (relative to our wealth [evil laugh emoticon]) is giving rural children an opportunity, through reading, to open their worldview, see the outside world, and from there slowly find and realize their own dream; and looking at themselves, increase their inner strength, and make use of the limited fair opportunities (such as the college entrance examination), and progress toward their dream; or even if they can’t reach their dream, they can make themselves extraordinary and avoid sinking [into depression or depravity] (*huozhe jishi bu neng dadao, ye neng rang ziji bu pingyong bu chenlun*).

Li Xirui: Good summary!

Nancy: Dreams are not given by others, we should not boast that we are almsgivers (*women ye bu shi zixu wei shizhe*).

Li Xirui: Mm, my wording was wrong, hehe.

Nancy: I agree with Li Xirui, volunteers are indeed living textbooks and role models, who can enable children to see the image of their dreams. So I always feel that the selection of volunteers is important.

Li Xirui: Mm, sincere and prudent. [shy emoticon]

Xiwen: [strong emoticon] [strong emoticon] [strong emoticon]

Huifang: [clap] [clap] [clap] [clap] [clap]

Yingliu: Great job, teacher!

Xirui’s initial mistake was using the phrase “give dreams” (*geiyu mengxiang*). In DreamAction’s style of talk, the word “give” was taboo and to be an “almsgiver” (*shizhe*) implied arrogance. This style of talk shielded volunteers from feeling any sense of material obligation to poor people. Xirui intended to say that volunteers helped rural children to realize their dreams, which, in fact, was very similar to Nancy’s statement. Nancy, however, avoided directly framing DreamAction’s purpose as “giving” something rural



children, and instead framed volunteers as simply presenting rural children with opportunities from which they could choose. In her framing, it was “not possible” to equitably distribute resources, and the “most effective way” to help rural people (though she managed to avoid using the taboo word “help”) was to “expand their worldview” and inspire them to “find their dream” and “inner strength.” In addition to dismissing the question of unequal material resources by stating that absolute equality of resources was impossible, Nancy made a number of assumptions in the process of making her argument: the college entrance exam was a “fair opportunity”; rural children do not know about the “outside world”; rural children need to be exposed to the “outside world” by volunteers in order to find their own personal “dream”; once rural children find their dream they can “progress towards” realizing that dream; and finally, if rural people have a dream but are unable to realize it they will still be better off because simply having the dream will make them “extraordinary” and avoid “sinking.” No one questioned these assumptions. In the volunteers’ eyes, the mere fact that Nancy *appeared* to resolve contradictions in DreamAction’s discourse was a feat worthy of praise.

Many volunteers contradicted themselves, but they were not as forthright as Lin Xirui, so the contradictions were not as obvious. On another occasion, Lin Xinrui remarked to the WeChat group that she felt one of DreamAction’s main fundraising activities contradicted DreamAction’s principles. Every year, DreamAction teams in several North American universities held a mock-up version of a popular Chinese dating show “If You Are the One.” Hundreds of overseas Chinese students paid to by tickets to these fundraising events, where they watched student contestants woo potential partners, often by showing off their expensive hobbies. One volunteer proudly showed me and several other volunteers a video from her own university’s “If You Are the One” fundraising event, in which one male contestant, a fellow overseas Chinese student, spoke of his love of flying and showed off his own propeller plane. Many Chinese pundits have criticized the actual television show for promoting materialism and bad manners. When Lin Xirui remarked on WeChat that holding a college version of this dating show for the

purpose of raising money contradicted DreamAction’s principles, she was simply ignored—no one responded and the same fundraising activities have continued since then.<sup>3</sup>

Volunteers rarely interrogated their organization’s purpose or principles. NGO leaders actively maintained the accord of volunteers. NGO leaders packaged each organization’s goals into a clear, short mission statement, and often asked volunteers to verbally repeat this mission statement aloud. Leaders’ expectation that volunteers fully identify with their organization’s mission statement could prevent volunteers from questioning the logic of the organization’s purpose. Lichun, the founder of PAL, quizzed the fifty or so volunteers gathered for a training session. “What is the purpose of PAL,” he asked. One volunteer rose his hand and said, “To provide every child—.” Lichun quickly cut him off, saying “Student.” PAL volunteers were taught to refer to their rural students as “students” and never as children. The volunteer continued reciting the mission statement, “To provide every student with the ability to *choose* a liberal arts education.” Very rarely did anyone publically question the mission statement of their organization. Only the organization’s founders, like the co-founder who started the aforementioned WeChat discussion, felt comfortable directly interrogating the value of their organization’s mission.

When ordinary volunteers did raise questions about the value of volunteerism, their questions were often dismissed as impractical or inappropriate. During a DreamAction training session, one volunteer asked whether it was morally defensible for volunteers to enter rural towns, given that the volunteers could not fully understand the consequences of their actions. A DreamAction organizer responded, “We have to at least try to do something . . . We can learn from our mistakes.” The organizer quickly moved on to address other questions. During an orientation meeting in which all of that year’s DreamAction volunteers gathered in Beijing, a panel of former volunteers answered questions from a stage. When a volunteer in the audience mentioned the Illich article from the training session and asked

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<sup>3</sup> Likewise, when a rural school principal called on the organization’s volunteers to boycott Apple products, claiming that the new iPhone did not recognize Chinese territorial claims on the South China Sea, he was also ignored. Volunteers often took the explicit nationalism displayed by some rural people as evidence that they had been brainwashed and were unable to think rationally.

how volunteers could make sure they were not doing more harm than good, the panel member quickly replied, “We don’t have time for this kind of question. If you want to discuss questions like this, you can talk about it some other time.”

Similarly, while volunteering across southwest China with PAL, I participated in the nightly meetings of volunteers, which took place in a hotel room of whichever city we were volunteering in at the moment. Our team leader allotted each volunteer exactly one minute to raise questions or suggestions regarding the volunteer project. When it was my turn to speak, I mentioned that volunteers might benefit from better understanding the long-range objective of our particular volunteer project, which revolved around interviewing former students of the organization’s liberal arts summer camps. A former volunteer and staff member who was present for that particular meeting criticized my comment for being too abstract and impractical, and then praised another volunteer’s question about how to conduct interviews for being concrete and practical. Thus, NGO leaders and volunteers would occasionally dismiss challenging questions about the organization’s mission by appealing to “practicality.”

NGO leaders also selectively used “limited time” as justification for dismissing difficult questions, though the NGO leaders themselves determined the availability of time for discussion of various topics. During training sessions and during volunteer projects, NGO leaders provided very little time for volunteers to discuss larger questions about the purpose of the organization or apparent contradictions. This seemed to suit the preference of most volunteers. Even at DreamAction’s annual “retreat,” in which those volunteers who could afford it gathered for three days at an Airbnb house in the United States, volunteers spent very little time discussing the organization’s purpose, and most of the time touring the local area, eating, and raucously playing card games. The time spent in shared leisure was justified as “team-building.”

Volunteers who recognized contradictions learned to censor themselves to avoid being seen as disruptive to the organization’s efficacy and unity. After returning to Beijing, one volunteer confided to me that he didn’t feel it was right to spend hundreds of yuan on a Peking Duck dinner, as the other

volunteers did, after spending a month interacting with destitute people in the far-west province of Gansu. Others shifted their speech when talking with different audiences. In the school where I volunteered in Henan, the principal told me that the main reason he welcomed volunteers from DreamAction was that they broke up the monotony of everyday life in that school. As I accompanied him around the area, some locals asked him, “Why did you invite *zhijiao* to the school?” He responded, “They make the children happy.” The principal likely recognized that rural people might take offense if he said that the volunteers were there to “cultivate the habit of reading.” Furthermore, the principal himself did not seem to care much about that objective. However, when introducing the volunteers to local people in more formal settings, such as the school’s Children’s Day performance, he made sure to recite DreamAction’s motto of “Let Reading Set Forth Dreams.” By changing how he described volunteers in different settings and for different audiences, the school principal negotiated the contradiction between how rural people viewed the usefulness of privileged, urban volunteers. Whereas rural people saw volunteers as novel outsiders who could break up daily monotony, volunteers viewed themselves as educational and spiritual missionaries to a culturally benighted population.

## CHAPTER 4:

### MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES: VOLUNTEERS' INTERACTIONS WITH RURAL PEOPLE

#### Challenges to Volunteers' Frames

Volunteers were surprised to find that their students were not necessarily passive victims of poverty or lacking for ambition. In fact, many seemed self-sufficient and even upwardly mobile, particularly in the relatively developed province of Guangdong:

Right now my students are already earning money, seventh and fifth graders are already working. My school ends at 4, and after school they go to the factory and work. They spend their own money, they don't ask their parents for money. When I first got there I couldn't believe it, a few seventh and eighth graders bought their own cellphones and computers. (Yuan Ming, Beautiful China volunteer in Guangdong, female)

Volunteers had expected that their students would be happy to have a volunteer teacher who could tell them about "the outside world" and who believed in their potential. Volunteers found, however, that their students already had dreams of moving to the city and getting rich, and only saw school as an impediment to this goal:

Electronic production is numerous, so the economic development isn't bad. Going to that place as a volunteer teacher, we kept thinking about this problem, whether or not that place needed teachers . . . To give some simple statistics, in that place a teacher could only make two or three thousand yuan per month, but if you lack education and only graduated from elementary school, you could go work in a factory and make four or five thousand in a month. So this gap, this economic gap [caused by factory wages being twice as high as rural teachers' wages] led people to not really value education, so in the beginning we felt very aimless, we didn't know what we should do, this was our impression of that place (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China volunteer in Guangdong, male).

Students' apparent self-sufficiency and lack of interest in education left volunteers feeling unsure of their role within the village.

Volunteers in the less developed province of Yunnan were aware that most of their students were poor and lacked money for basic school supplies. However, like the volunteers in Guangdong, they framed local economic opportunities as being harmful to their students:

Douge was very poor before, the study atmosphere was pretty good, everyone would study, and then take the test. But now all over Yunnan a few rather rich people appeared, and people started going to the city to work, and then earning money, and after they returned there were some with more money. At this time some wealth appeared and many

people started saying that I don't necessarily need to study, I can go work and more money than my teacher, they felt studying isn't necessary . . . The students weren't very kind and simple, not like those children in the mountains [of Yunnan]. Our students had come into contact with many things, they could access the internet, and they were rather chaotic, but many were always thinking about making money, they wanted to make money quickly, and they were very naughty, they didn't like to study, their anti-study sentiment was very serious. (Wen Yaobing, Beautiful China volunteer in Yunnan, male)

And now, China's economy is developing fast, the price of real estate is rising quickly, and you live in that area between the city and country, so as the city expands they will requisition their land. When the government requisitions the land they will compensate the families with some money, so those families will become rich overnight . . . to them it's a lot of money . . . many families will think that with so much money their children don't need to go to school. (Yan Yifei, Beautiful China volunteer in Yunnan, female)

Rural people themselves saw the presence of economic opportunities as a positive development. Why, then, did volunteers feel threatened by the availability of economic opportunities to their students? After all, several volunteers claimed that they joined Beautiful China because they were concerned about social inequality. Volunteers felt threatened by their students' economic opportunities because they called into question whether volunteers were needed in these areas at all. Volunteers joined the program because they believed that education could "change someone's life," but they found that their students were capable of changing their own lives without formal schooling.

Moreover, the prosperity of local people and the apparent economic opportunities available to students blurred the symbolic boundary between teacher and student. Volunteers previously thought of themselves as people of privilege who were using their privilege to help those less fortunate. They discovered, however, that their students could make more money than local teachers by going to work in a factory. Teachers' lack of obvious economic superiority vis-à-vis their students made volunteers question "whether or not this place really needed teachers." In the volunteers' minds, a rural teacher was supposed to help lift students up out of poverty. Students making more money than teachers called the purpose and authority of teachers into question.

Volunteers also imagined that they could "expand the worldview" of their students by introducing them to information about the "outside world." They found, however, that their students were

already somewhat knowledgeable about the outside world. Moreover, their contact with the outside world only made them “chaotic,” for they were more interested in making money than paying attention in class.

Volunteers had originally expected to find “kind and simple” children with a hunger to learn. Volunteers, having graduated from China’s top universities, believed that they possessed the skill and knowledge to be effective teachers who would help students escape poverty. They were surprised to discover that their students were not interested in learning, at least not in school. When disrespected or ignored by students, volunteer teachers did not know how to reclaim their role as teachers.

### **Repairing the Volunteer Teacher Identity by Invalidating Rural People’s Perspectives and Decisions**

Volunteers, lacking a sense of purpose, used narrative to clarify the symbolic boundary between volunteers and students. The primary problem, in the eyes of volunteers, could not be that the students lacked quality teachers, for the volunteers thought that they were preparing quality lessons. Moreover, the problem was not necessarily lack of self-esteem or lack of knowledge about the “outer world,” as the students seemed to possess both. Thus, volunteers framed students as lacking the ability to make the autonomous, rational, informed life decisions which would allow them to live “meaningful lives.”

#### *Framing Students as Misled by Parents and Peers*

Volunteers framed their students’ lack of interest in school as a result of a herd mentality, rather than an expression of their own agency:

I hope even more that the students will consider their present condition, I want to make them think about where they currently are, to think about their circumstances and the things they see, and not just follow others. For example, [I don’t want them] to say, “everyone else has stopped studying and gone to work, so I will go follow them.”

This volunteer’s narrative about rural students’ decisions portrays rural students as unthinking followers.

This volunteer claimed that students quit school to work because they did not adequately “consider their present condition” and instead opted to “follow others.” Many volunteers lamented that rural children

wanted to “follow the path of their parents” by becoming a farmer or manual laborer. In this narrative,

rural youth were simply perpetuating a cycle by choosing the same profession as their ancestors. It was up

to the volunteers to interrupt this cycle and inspire students to, as one NGO leader put it, “think of themselves as individuals.”

Rather than directly blame the students for making bad decisions, volunteers typically blamed their parents or their peers for misleading them. By denying their students’ agency, volunteers were able to frame themselves as responsible for teaching their students how to make “individual” decisions.

### *Framing Rural People as Lacking Self-Knowledge*

Volunteers engaged in “home visits,” which became an opportunity to ascribe blame on parents and grandparents for their students’ lack of motivation to study:

We did some visits with the families and we found that some parents say their children can study as much or as little as they want...but if [students] are personally interested in studying then they won’t let these external influences, such as their parents, influence them.

Right now their level of spiritual civilization isn’t very good, because they are very worldly, they think that as soon as they have a little money it’s ok to go out and get drunk, play cards, idle the days away. What we teach this young generation is that as they encounter social changes, when they feel that they themselves must change, they should use their own energy and resources, at that time they should learn more knowledge and make some changes. I think that right now they are small children, their lives are really good, and what’s even better is that the government has paid them for their land. They can afford to build a small house and perhaps even live better than people in Beijing, because their house is like a villa. But if you ask them why they built their house, they can’t really explain it to you. They say that other people did it so they did it too, they want to make their house more beautiful, they want to live better than before. This kind of happiness in life, I don’t really understand it, so I didn’t know what to tell them. (Yan Yifei, Beautiful China volunteer, female)

The volunteer did not see renovating one’s house as a worthy goal, and she saw their drinking, gambling and idling as “worldly” and reflecting a “low level of spiritual civilization.” She believed that rural people should instead make an effort to change “themselves” and “learn more knowledge.”

Another problem, according to this volunteer, was that rural people couldn’t “really explain” their actions. She was not satisfied with their explanation that they built up their house to make it more beautiful, and “live better than before,” claiming, “This kind of happiness in life, I don’t really understand it . . .” This volunteer’s expectation that rural people should be able to explain their actions to her in a



certain manner echoes Foucault's description of Freudian psychotherapy and Catholic confession (Foucault 1978). Just as the therapist is the authority who listens to and interprets the thoughts of the patient, and the priest is the authority from which one receives absolution after confession, this volunteer frames herself as having the authority to judge rural people's actions as rational or irrational depending on whether or not they can "really explain" their actions to her, and whether or not their explanations make sense to her. She concluded that her responsibility as a volunteer was to teach her students how to love learning, which she believed was essential to their becoming self-directed individuals.

Volunteers framed being self-directed as sufficient in and of itself. According to this narrative, if rural students could only "find one's place," then they would live a happy life:

I hope they will be people who are useful to society. Although this is a big goal, first they can find their place in society, what is your place. For example, "I really want to be a serviceperson." I think they will go to this position, but they need to live more happily, to have a feeling of satisfaction, "I think this is really great, I'm very happy," this enough . . . the key is that no profession has a lowly component, they're all the same, in whether or not you fit this kind of work, and whether you are very happy doing this work, if you feel very happy, then that is the best kind of work for you. (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China volunteer, male)

Similarly, another volunteer taught her students to find meaning in their lives by adopting a sort of Protestant work ethic:

The fact is, most of them will not attend high school, let alone university . . . I told them that no matter what you do, do your best . . . If you collect herbs all day, be the best herb collector you can be. (Guo Yuping, Beautiful China volunteer, female)

After staying in the countryside for a period of time, some volunteers came to the conclusion that it was very unlikely that their students would attend a top university or make a lot of money. These volunteers believed actual social mobility was too unrealistic. Thus, they opted for teaching students to "find their place" by figuring out what would give them "a feeling of satisfaction." This required framing students as not yet knowing "their place" or not doing their "best." This narrative, which implies that one only needs to "find one's place" to be happy, legitimates inequality by assuming that those low-income workers who are dissatisfied with their current job simply lack understanding of what job is best for them, or are not doing their "best" and therefore not finding meaning within their current job.

### *Framing Students as Lacking Ambition*

Another volunteer claimed that his students were satisfied living in relative poverty:

[The situation in Guangdong] is different from our situation [in Yunnan.] Right now our students' parents all do farming, planting tobacco, corn, grain, wheat, those kinds of things. They don't think, if we work we can go to Shenzhen, Guangzhou, this is very difficult, they mainly stay in Yunnan or somewhere nearby... They're different from your situation [in Guangdong], so if you give them vocational training in Shenzhen, and furthermore those students have that kind of business atmosphere, they can do some things themselves. But our students over here, I think our most numerous and popular vocational training is to operate the land excavation machine, it makes a lot of money, at most you can make 10 or 20 thousand yuan per month. But other kinds of studies are few, so those students go to work as drivers, or the girls work in restaurants, this is more common. Because their goal is, in fact, just to make a living, anything other than planting crops is fine. "I don't plant crops, I work, and after working a few years I can get married and have kids." It's like this, they don't have much possibility or desire to develop themselves. (Yao Wenbing, Beautiful China volunteer, male)

Unlike volunteers in Guangdong, who complained that students wanted to go to big cities to make more money, this volunteer criticized his students' satisfaction with finding low-paying jobs in small towns, as well as their lack of "desire to develop themselves." In both cases, volunteers attributed their students' lack of interest in school to individual and cultural deficiencies.

### *Constructing Narratives of Students' Futures*

Volunteers relied on constructing stories about their students' life trajectories in order to give their volunteer work meaning. To justify the importance of attending school, volunteers constructed stories of how China would develop and why staying in school was in the students' best interest:

A worker with a grasp of English and IT is more useful. I tell them wait at least ten years before you go work, you don't know what the needs for workers will be at that time, I feel two are very important, you should know a little English and IT. No matter what you do, this will be necessary for workers in ten years, so you should keep studying. What you have studied up until now isn't enough, you have no way to prepare for the future. (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China volunteer, male)

I'm worried, I told them that they think making money is easy now, you can make four or five thousand yuan in a summer, but if you stop school now then your whole life you will just be making two or three thousand a month, I also tell some students I'm really worried that their whole lives they will do this kind of thing, sewing clothes non-stop every day, sewing labels onto things, if you think this is good then you can do it your whole life, but it's difficult, very few will listen to me, because their parents influence on them is larger than the teacher's.

Volunteers' narratives typically incorporated the idea that China's job market was rapidly changing, and that the skills taught by volunteers would be necessary to navigate and succeed within this changing job market. Qiu Shikai had relatively specific ideas about what kinds of skills would be needed, citing English and I.T., but most other volunteers claimed that more general abilities such as "innovation" and "critical thinking" were necessary for their students' future success.

At a meeting of the volunteer organization PAL, for example, when we were discussing how best to help rural students, one meeting participant stated that "in this globalized world, the economy is constantly changing. People need to learn how to adapt to the times and be innovative. For example, perhaps [those rural students] could grow organic food and market it to people in the city." The participant implied that the PAL volunteer organization should foster this "innovative" spirit within rural students so that they could take advantage of "globalization," in which economic opportunities were narrated as constantly appearing and changing.

Zou Yueling claimed that her students needed to stay in school so as to develop the knowledge and critical thinking necessary for navigating the treacheries of the working world:

So some of the local teachers will ask the kids to actually memorize the answers to those most-frequently asked questions. And in order to get a score that's not that bad in the final assessment. So I mean it's like with that kind of method kids would basically, they don't use their brains, they don't know how to think critically. They don't know how to think, actually. And for those kids, I really don't think that without a certain level of critical thinking skills and without a basic of understanding of citizenship, about their own rights, about, I don't know, I mean it's basically about life or the life afterwards. How can they be prepared once they leave the school? Outside there will be drug dealers, people smugglers, that is not a very safe region I would say, in so many aspects. I don't think they prepare themselves that well, for that kind of life afterwards. And I mean it's like there will be a lot of sweatshops so once they leave the school most of the kids would start working very early at the age of 14 or 15 and that would make themselves very vulnerable. They don't know how to protect themselves.

Interviewer: From their bosses?

Zou Yueling: From their bosses, and from some evil co-workers, and I don't know, from some bad guys in the society. I don't know, it's like, they really don't know how to protect themselves and they don't know how to—it's not about learning the textbook, it's about learning itself. They don't know how to learn the new way or learn new stuff by reading or by improving certain skills or something like that. And I mean it's like if they

just go into work as a child laborer at that age, I really don't think that's a very good choice for them to make at that age. And if I just let them go like that, that would be very irresponsible for me.

Although volunteers themselves had very little knowledge of job opportunities open to poor rural young people, they constructed stories in which students who did not stay in school would inevitably spend their whole lives in poverty. They claimed that students who learned “critical thinking” and other aspects of “quality education” from volunteers would be prepared to succeed in what volunteers saw as a rapidly changing job market which favored those who knew how to be, as many volunteers put it, “leaders of themselves.”

### **Constructing a Positive Volunteer Identity by Diagnosing Problems in Rural Culture**

Volunteers' pre-existing prejudices and belief in meritocracy led them to frame rural people as lacking the ability to make good decisions. In addition, it was volunteers' desire to think of themselves as leaders and as autonomous adults which motivated them to actively maintain their perception that rural people needed their guidance. Most of the volunteer teachers were fresh college graduates eager to prove to themselves and others that they were capable adults. In their eyes, this required taking on the identity of a “leader” and “teacher” rather than humbling oneself and attempting to learn from rural people.

Like many volunteers, Zou Yueling hoped that her volunteer experience would help her to find an identity and purpose within her own life. Her story illustrates how the identity she eventually found, as a teacher and leader to rural youth, was dependent on framing rural people as culturally deficient.

Volunteers were assembled into teams, and they would discuss their experiences daily. This gave them an opportunity to formulate new motivations for teaching:

I found the conversations with my co-fellows really inspiring in terms of learning and teaching. And I recall there was one day that completely changed my perspective and attitude toward teaching. That day we were standing on the playground and that [volunteer teaching] fellow, that math teacher, he just all of a sudden asked me a question: Had I ever thought about the fact that we're looking at the whole next generation of that town? . . . I mean it's like, we have the opportunity to train or prepare those kids for the future. And those kids have all kinds of possibilities for the next five to ten years in this place. I mean, that question did push me to think a lot more about the teaching itself as a career, and also our responsibility in the classroom, especially in those kinds of communities.

Framing herself as qualified to “train or prepare those kids for the future” required framing her students’ parents as woefully unfit to give parental guidance. It also required framing her students as lacking the “common knowledge” required to make good decisions.

As I told you before, the parent’s education, it was just absent. Basically they’re just feeding them and then hitting them when they’re misbehaving and that’s it. And that is not education at all. And those kids, they don’t have that much access to information on the internet, and also they don’t have that many books to read so they have a very absurd lack of common knowledge. Most of my kids, they don’t know where the United States is. They don’t know that London is actually a city instead of a country. Most of them don’t know which country is which and which continent they’re in, and something like that. They just have totally no idea about this common sense. Because they just lack resources and they don’t have that much access.

Zou Yueling taught in an economically undeveloped area of Yunnan, so, in contrast to students encountered by volunteers in Guangdong, her students were visibly poor and lacked internet access. The “common knowledge” this volunteer describes as essential to her students, such as knowing the major capitals of the world, draws from the universalized, standardized curriculum described by scholars of “world society.” She believes that her students must attain this highly universalized and standardized form of “common knowledge” in order to take advantage of the “possibilities” available to them.

Moreover, this volunteer maintained that she had a responsibility to teach “moral standards and ethics” as well as “critical thinking skills,” which would allow her students to overcome future dangers:

Interviewer: And what did you feel your responsibility was to the people and to the children?

Zou Yueling: I would say that responsibility is not only in the classroom. It’s like the whole package. Because it’s like the parents are there. Just as much as they love the kids, they really don’t know how to raise them and how to educate them. They know very little about the education, and probably the one thing they know is that when they’re hungry they will feed, when they lack money they will provide money, and when they don’t behave themselves they can practice corporal punishment, and that’s it. I mean that’s the very traditional Chinese parenting way in rural areas. But that doesn’t work for a kid in that community. So for those kids, most of them will just follow the path, follow the trajectory of their parents. Because in that kind of community it’s very difficult for the kids to imagine or believe in something that they have never seen. So the parents, either they work in the farmland or they work as a migrant worker in the city, or some of them will be involved in drug dealing or something...

Interviewer: Do you feel that they all should stay in school, it's the right choice?

Zou Yueling: Umm, I would say if you live, you need to prepare yourself for the life afterwards. I'm not saying that you need to stay in school or your need to finish a certain level of education, but I'm just saying that you need to be responsible for your own choice. If you decided to leave, I mean it's like up to you, but you need to prove to me that you are capable of taking care of yourself. But for me, most of the kids, they just couldn't. So in the past, that's also has something to do with the teaching method, that most of the local teachers have been using. It's very simple and straightforward. If you can score—most of the local teachers, they don't ask that many questions. All you have to do is read the text, to memorize the key points, and then to perhaps memorize it time after time . . .

According to Zou Yueling, local teachers' memorization-based method of teaching did not prepare students to make their "own choice" or take care of themselves. Zou Yueling claimed to use a Socratic method of teaching which developed her students' ability to "think." This would help them avoid "following the path" of their parents.

Thus, Zou Yueling framed herself as capable of radically changing the future of an entire generation the town's young people, but this was dependent on first framing rural students as lacking the ability to think and lacking parental guidance. While she previously felt that she had simply been "following a track," she finally felt that she was living a life of purpose and self-direction, but this required framing rural people as lacking purpose and self-direction.

Volunteers' commonly asked rural children "What is your dream?" or "What do you want to be when you grow up?" When rural children said "I don't know" volunteers took this as evidence that rural children "didn't know how to dream." When students proposed stereotypically rural goals such as "I want to be a farmer" or "I want to be a truck driver," some volunteers would give an embarrassed laugh and later lament with other volunteers that these rural children were simply following the example of their parents rather than truly pursuing their own dreams. When most female 5<sup>th</sup> graders said that they wanted to be teachers, the volunteer teacher of this class took that as evidence that they lacked positive role models other than their local teachers. While this may be true, volunteers lacked clear ideas about what kinds of jobs they hoped rural students would pursue. Most volunteers told me "It's not up to me to

decide, it's up to them." Volunteers saw the quality of one's career as primarily related to one's degree of self-knowledge and knowledge of various options, not the resources one possessed. When, after a period of time, students gave answers like "I want to be an author" or "I want to be a pilot," volunteers took this as evidence that they had inspired rural children to "dream."

Because the target of volunteers' efforts was young children, volunteers never saw the end result of their volunteerism. They assumed that the "impact" they had upon their students was imperceptible and would not be fully realized until later. In one case, however, I observed volunteers confront the possibility that teaching rural students to "pursue their dreams" did not have the intended effects. PAL led a special one-month winter program in which new volunteers went back to old volunteer sites to interview the now 17-19-year-old rural students who had taken PAL's liberal arts summer school several years earlier. One of the volunteers who joined our team of 10 interviewers was, herself, a former student of a PAL summer school. This young woman, Zheng, was 21 years old and about to graduate from a southwestern university with a Bachelor's degree in communications. She had grown up in a poor Hmong village but attended a boarding school in a city in Hunan, where she encountered PAL volunteers eight years ago. She took PAL's message of studying hard and pursuing one's dreams to heart, and she had hoped to become a professional singer or work in media, but she now felt disillusioned. She privately lamented to several other volunteers that she could not find a decent job with her Bachelor's degree in communications from a second-tier university for ethnic minority students, and she felt that she would most likely have to return to her rural village after graduation and set up a small shop, just like her elementary school classmates who had not even attended high school. She also told a leader in PAL that she felt that she did not fit in with the other volunteers, who mostly came from elite universities in large Chinese cities and who seemed to have a lot of money to spend as we traveled around southwestern China conducting interviews. She ended up leaving the volunteer activity after two weeks to return to her hometown.

After she left, the remaining volunteers discussed her departure and one said, “Isn’t it pitiful that even though she studied hard and went to university, she feels she can never be really successful?” All of the volunteers looked down in silence, seemingly not knowing what to say. After a few seconds, one male volunteer said, “Yes, it’s pitiful. So what? Why can’t we just accept that it’s pitiful?,” perhaps critiquing volunteers’ typically optimistic style of talk.

This episode illustrates how volunteers’ belief in their own impact was predicated on the idea that encouraging rural children to “have dreams” would significantly improve their lives. This belief could be sustained if volunteers did not actually keep track of most of their students into adulthood, but rather constructed their own stories about the impact they were making. One NGO staff leader, for example, encouraged volunteers by saying, “Maybe one day we will find out that one of our students has tested into Peking University, or has invented some new product.” Volunteers’ often focused on intangible goals, such as inspiring children to have dreams, and they could imagine the results of their volunteerism without ever being proven wrong.



**CHAPTER 5:**  
**NARRATIVES OF NATIONAL PROGRESS:**  
**PATRIOTIC ENTREPRENEURS AND CHINA'S FUTURE**

China appears to be one of the most optimistic countries in the world. About ninety-percent of Chinese people say that the economy is improving (Simmons 2014). Seventy-percent say that they are happy (Liu, Xiong and Su 2012). One marketing firm's survey showed that 41% of Chinese people think that things are getting better in the world, about twice as many as the average percentage from all other countries (Dahlgreen 2016). Despite concerns about inequality, most Chinese seem to believe that a free market economy will make things better for everyone. About 70% of Chinese people say that "most people are better off in a free market economy, even if some are rich and some are poor" (Simmons 2014).

Why are most Chinese citizens seemingly optimistic, and why do they believe that a free market economy will improve the lives of the majority of people? I argue that Chinese citizens draw upon two master narratives when imagining their collective future. The first narrative claims that innovation led by elites will improve life for everyone. The second narrative claims that reclaiming prosperity and glory is China's destiny. I show how Chinese volunteers use these narratives to remain optimistic about the effect of their volunteerism, even when they do not see concrete results. The ambiguity of these narratives makes them attractive (Polletta 1998, 2006), as privileged young adults perceive opportunities to become part of an unfolding story while retaining their privilege and individual autonomy. In other words, these narratives tie diverse individual ambitions into a unified, patriotic, and humanitarian cause.

**Optimism in Volunteerism**

It did not matter to most volunteers that they did not always see concrete outcomes as a result of their volunteerism. They valued the act of volunteering in and of itself, framing it as an expression of both individual agency and the agency of the Chinese people as a whole. Moreover, volunteerism represented regular people having the freedom to contribute to society on their own terms. Volunteers' narratives described individuals pursuing their passions and expressing their creativity, and in the process,

developing solutions for existing problems. According to Bai Xing, who has volunteered with many NGOs, volunteerism brings freedom to young people, as well as opportunities to make a difference. In other words, he perceives volunteerism as giving Chinese young people agency even though they continue to live in a society where “government control is bigger and bigger.” Bai Xing believes that as long as young people have the ability to try new things, Chinese society will be happier and more colorful.

Interviewer: How do you test the impact of the NGO programs?

Bai Xing: We’re always discussing how to do evaluation. This is a really hard question. It’s very hard to measure, do you measure the test scores, do you measure the change in the students’ concepts (*gainian*)? How do you measure concepts? So measuring is very hard, but I think that educational NGOs should think of a way to measure, as a matter of principle. From what I’ve seen, most don’t do this well. But from the big picture, I don’t think the importance of NGOs and volunteers only lies in the interaction between teachers and students. For example, 20 years ago the Hope Project began. At that time there was no other so-called “public interest organization” (*gongyi zuzhi*). There was only the Hope Project. If you wanted to do some “public interest” (*gongyi*) then people said “Oh, you need to work with the Hope Project.” But I think that something interesting is that there has been a big change. Now people can see “There are so many ways of doing things, so many volunteers, oh, we can do things that way.” I think that is important to society.

Interviewer: So there is a television program that focuses on “public interest.” So it seems that this concept of public interest and charity is becoming more frequently used.

Bai Xing: Before 2008, if you said “volunteer” or “public interest” most people don’t know what you’re talking about. If I told my relatives I was doing “public interest” they asked if I’m selling “public interest products,” souvenirs. My grandma, to this day she doesn’t understand what I’m doing. My parents have a general idea of what I do. Before 2008 no one understood if you told them you were a “social enterprise” or “foundation.” But now they’re interested if you tell them, so the thinking has changed.

Interviewer: So would you say that the social values have improved?

Bai Xing: It’s hard to say, because every day you can see many good things and many terrible things. But I think you can sense that the general trend is that people are more aware. More and more young people are doing interesting things. But as far as government, you can see every day that the government control is bigger and bigger. Their control is more and more. The problems are more every day. So to ask is it getting better? If you look at one part of China, you can say yes. But if you look at another, it’s hard to say.

For Bai Xing, the mere fact that volunteers existed at all was evidence of progress. This represented more freedom for regular people, which he contrasted with “government control.” Positive change, in his

narrative, would come from “more and more young people doing interesting things” and people realizing that there are “so many ways of doing things.” The freedom to try new things allowed everyone to join in the story of China’s development, not just as a follower but as a creative leader. He acknowledged that the actual effect of volunteerism on rural children was important, but he also felt that the process of volunteerism and non-profit work was valuable in and of itself, for it allowed regular people to unlock their creative potential by becoming social entrepreneurs. Moreover, Bai Xing and other Chinese citizens view Chinese volunteerism as evidence of the agency of the “Chinese people” as a whole. Volunteerism represented Chinese people becoming the masters of their own country’s destiny. Chinese volunteers hoped to show that they could do things on their own and were not reliant on either the Chinese government or foreign capital.

The emergence of volunteer organizations allows idealistic Chinese people to tell a story about China’s ongoing spiritual development. A co-founder of DreamAction told me that “this spirit of volunteering is very important for China.” Volunteers embraced the idea that their actions were Quixotic. Some spoke of their admiration for Americans’ “faith” that small actions would lead to large outcomes in the long run. Volunteers claimed that simply making a small effort to promote the volunteering spirit, inspire young children to “develop themselves,” promote egalitarianism, or resist “the tide of globalization” was itself a spiritual practice. Faith, in the power of small actions to create a large effect over time, was valued in and of itself.

In contrast to the “Lei Feng spirit,” which valorizes self-sacrifice, loyalty to the party, and service to the abstract entity of “the people,” contemporary Chinese narratives about volunteerism emphasize individuality and personal interactions between individual people. Volunteers spoke of wanting to help people directly, through face-to-face emotion work, rather than in the abstract. Volunteers contrasted the authenticity of volunteerism with life as a civic worker or businessperson, in which one has to conform to the demands of one’s environment or strategically tailor one’s image and behavior in order to maximize the utility of various relationships. According to many volunteers, Chinese people already had sufficient

wealth. Now they needed to focus on spirit. To them, the mere existence of volunteerism was evidence that Chinese people's spirit was improving.

### **Innovation Led by Elites**

Beautiful China's official Chinese website claims to address the problem of educational inequality "in the long term," by placing former teaching fellows in elite positions across a variety of industries:

We resolve educational inequality in the following ways:

1. Send excellent teachers to areas lacking educational resources.
2. Develop leaders who will struggle to resolve unequal educational resources in the long run . . .

The two years which teachers spend in the classroom is just the beginning of the deep influence that they have on students. In the long run, we help teaching fellows to become the driving force for change in every field, and through their hard work, resolve the problem of China's unequal distribution of resources.

In these two years, the teaching fellows develop abilities and accumulate experiences which win the praise of many enterprises. [These enterprises] will work together with us to develop teachers' leadership ability, and help those teachers to become the backbone of every industry

So far, of those teaching fellows who have chosen the direction of their future career, approximately 40% will enter the non-profit or educational field, and over 25% will continue their studies in the world's elite universities.

Similar to Beautiful China's official model of placing elite volunteers into elite positions after they return from the countryside, the volunteers whom I talked to often suggested that elites would "someday" provide the solution for China's problems. According to Zou Yueling, a former Beautiful China volunteer, even if entrepreneurs and other elites are the cause of inequality, they will also, one day, provide the solution:

There might be one day when social inequity become so serious that the social entrepreneurs just cannot neglect it any longer, and the government, they just couldn't stand by or something like that. So it's like I believe that kind of trend . . . yeah I mean it's like somehow I still believe in social institutions somehow. And although perhaps the policy is made by the ruling party or the profiteers by the business sector, they might be the cause that led to this inequity or things per se. But I just believe that maybe someday

they will become the cure. Because this problem will become big enough someday that it will jeopardize their interests. And when it comes to a point that, I just feel that they couldn't just continue the way that they have been doing in the past.

Yueling does not specify how change will occur and what this change will be. Instead, her narrative maintains that elites, whether the ruling party or “profiteers,” will realize that it’s in their best interests to work together to create a more equal society. Like Beautiful China’s official narrative, Yueling places her faith in elites. However, volunteers like Yueling did not feel that these elites needed to work in the non-profit or educational sectors. My respondents felt that one could make a positive influence on society from virtually any field. The key to bringing progress, in their eyes, was to express oneself and be “innovative” in whichever field one chose.

Yueling believed that elites from the government, and not just from the private and non-profit sectors, would play an important role in making positive change. This relatively positive view of government officials was not shared by many of the NGO volunteers she knew. Yueling explained why the majority of her colleagues in Beautiful China sought jobs where they could be “entrepreneurial”:

Maybe some people would feel a problem about joining the government are taking the civil service track or something. Some people would say that it's not cool. Because it's kind of a very safe job, you have a safety net, you have a secure position in that thing, it's like a kind of tenure. You have a lifelong package that is waiting for you or something, so some people will think that is not cool. And some others would think that are going to be like a puppet, like play by the government or something. And basically it's like someday you're going to be as corrupted as others or something like that and you are going nowhere and it's like joining that kind of service or sector is basically just hopeless for some young people to think about. And right now especially some people think that civil servants are those people who lack passion about pursuing higher personal achievement or something. They just want security or something.

And some people would think, basically they just hate politics. I mean it's like in strict terms, civil service is totally different from politicians, from politics. But it's like in China is very easy for people to just confuse those two ideas. Especially right now it's like being a party member is like party membership and also it's like civil servant status and also it's like politics and those are things that are always intertwined. So it's very easy for people to just confuse those ideas together. So people will put them in like a whole package that is taxed like secure but not so cool. And like wealthy but not so adventurous and not so entrepreneurial. And it's like something that the older generation would really like to have but we as the next generation just don't fancy that kind of idea that much. And some people would tag it as something that is corrupted. And that is just like [another teaching fellow] said maybe that is something that is causing all the inequity and problems in the society as a whole.

Most NGO volunteers associated politics with careerism and corruption. In their eyes, entrepreneurialism gave individuals an opportunity to show their true talents rather than rely on artificial politicking or reap the benefits of a corrupt system.

When I asked volunteers what should be done about educational inequality, most admitted that they had not thought much about this question. After thinking for a while, though, many of them told stories about how innovation could solve China's problems. Volunteers' placed their faith in Chinese people's ability to invent new technology to "solve the root of inequality":

I think the government has been investing money in education for so long, this has only resolved the issue of students being able to eat for free, but this problem of resources is impossible to solve . . . So I lean toward the idea that there is a need for technology, or some force. I hope that some transformative thing will appear, so no matter where a child is he can come into contact with more resources, and have some window through which to contact more resources . . . Because with many things, you can't bring the resources from the city to the countryside, it's impossible to bring over, other than developing the countryside to be just like the cities. Some kind of technological force or innovation can let the people in the countryside truly see the same resources which are seen by those in the city. I feel that this is something the government might be able to do, but I am even more certain that this is something that can come from some enterprises or something from society. I think that this is what can solve the root of this inequality (Wen Yaobing, Beautiful China volunteer, male).

Many volunteers endorsed the privatization of education:

As far as China is concerned, China has many public schools . . . and it's very hard to have educational innovation within public schools, because the system is a problem . . . Through the market people can find better systems of education and educational methods, and furthermore this can be brought in and utilized by the public schools. I think this is a really perfect system . . . As far as how to concretely do this, I'm not really clear, I need to make more progress and do more things, try enacting more things. (Qiu Shikai, Beautiful China volunteer, male)

In volunteers' discussions, they seemed to assume that "educational reform" was an important goal. When I asked how this reform would improve educational equity, they seem perplexed by my question. A recruiter from Beautiful China told me that educational reform was important because it would give everyone, including rural students, the ability to choose the education that was right for them. The market was thus seen as not only practical for economic growth, but also an avenue to pursue one's individual dream.

Even though Communist Youth League members saw themselves as superior to NGO volunteers and others “outside the system,” they often sounded similar to entrepreneurs who advocated for innovation as a cure for social ills. Li Shengyuan, for example, claimed that the Communist Party was her “faith” and that her motivating credo was, “Serve the people.” Yet, when I asked what “serving the people” meant, she answered:

Serving the people includes many things. For example, social justice is just one interpretation. For example, for me to help everyone live a better life, to use technology to make things more convenient for everyone, this is also serving the people, it’s not just about social justice. But the starting point of everything we do is serving the people.

Both Communist Party members and NGO volunteers believe in the power of innovation, but Communist Party members claim that the state needs to manage innovation while NGO volunteers envision innovation coming from a diverse array of entrepreneurial individuals engaging in trial and error.

Entrepreneurialism was often seen as valuable in itself because it represented autonomy and self-fulfillment. Many volunteers told me that they felt that engaging in entrepreneurial business activities was a way to continue the work they began as volunteers. Guo Yuping, a Beautiful China volunteer, insisted that her current job in an online media marketing company was “in line” with her volunteerism at Beautiful China because she was able to be creative and express herself within this job. Just as they emphasized the values of autonomy and creativity as volunteers, former volunteers believed that entrepreneurial business represented a valuable opportunity for individual creativity within China. Other volunteers pursued M.B.A. degrees, and earnestly told me that they intended to use their business knowledge to make Chinese NGOs more efficient and economically self-sustainable.

Volunteers’ optimism in the power of innovation was partly based on their admiration for Western technology leaders like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. Moreover, the Chinese government framed entrepreneurialism as a patriotic act. Premier Li Keqiang frequently mentioned the role of marketization and innovation in growing China’s economy. An article from Xinhua News Service (2015) described Premier Li Keqiang’s emphasis on entrepreneurialism and innovation:

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang has urged local governments to enhance support for mass entrepreneurship and innovation to add new impetus to the country's growth . . . “With weak world economic recovery and withering global market, Chinese companies should take their due responsibilities and have the courage to compete in the global arena,” Li said.

They should demonstrate the high cost effectiveness of Chinese equipment products and strive to build world-renowned brands, he said . . .

“Ups and downs in growth are hardly avoidable, as they are natural in a period of adjustment and transition,” the premier said.

The premier remained upbeat on the prospects of China's economy due to its great potential and resilience, ongoing structural reforms and the stress on mass entrepreneurship and innovation.

Just as volunteers claimed that rural people should be more willing to take risks, the Premier stressed the need for “courage to compete in the global arena.” Government leaders and NGO volunteers alike claimed that an entrepreneurial spirit would contribute to “the country’s growth.”

### **National Destiny**

Chinese citizens’ optimism about free markets is not only the result of their benefitting from post-reform economic growth and their admiration for wealthy western countries. Even when economic growth slows, supporters of marketization claim that Chinese people will benefit from competing within a free market by drawing upon tropes about the inherent potential of the Chinese people and the destiny of the nation. The narrative of China’s destiny also obscures class divisions and prioritizes the nation’s economic growth by appealing to the “renewal” of the nation as a whole. President Xi Jinping remarked:

“Nowadays, everyone is talking about the 'China Dream,'" he said. "In my view, to realize the great renewal of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history.”

The China Dream has conglomerated the long-cherished aspiration of Chinese people of several generations, represented the overall interests of the Chinese nation and Chinese people, and has been a common expectation of every Chinese, according to Xi.

“History tells us that everybody has one's future and destiny closely connected to those of the country and nation,” the Party leader said, noting that the people's wellbeing relies on the strength of the country and prosperity of the nation.



It is a glorious and difficult cause to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which calls for efforts by Chinese generation by generation, said Xi, emphasizing, “Making empty talk is harmful to the nation, while doing practical jobs can help it thrive.” (Xinhua News Service 2012).

Like the volunteers, Xi Jinping emphasized the need for “practical” action, rather than “talk,” thus implicitly encouraging people to act in the economic realm while refraining from political discussion. Drawing on these official narratives of the Chinese people’s shared destiny, and the need for practical action, citizens framed their individual ambitions as patriotic.

Moreover, upper-class citizens downplayed the importance of resolving inequality by claiming that problems related to inequality would be resolved over time. These respondents were not optimistic that the gap between rich and poor would get smaller in the near future, but at the same time, most expressed optimism about China’s long term future. One respondent based her optimism on the progress that China has made in the past fifty years, and seemed particularly proud of China’s rise in international status.

Interviewer: Do you think the gap between rich and poor will increase or decrease?

Respondent (PAL volunteer, female): Maybe it will increase in the next five years, maybe even in the next fifty years, but I believe that in one hundred years or one thousand years China will be much more developed than it is now, this is undeniable. Over time, everyone’s life will improve. I just look at how much China has improved in the past fifty years, it’s unbelievable.

Interviewer: It seems to me that Chinese are very optimistic about their country’s future.

Respondent: Yes, because China’s rise is an amazing story. That’s why so many foreigners are coming to China, because they want to be part of that story.

Zou Yueling, a Beautiful China volunteer, maintained that major changes in policy must be preceded by a long period of preparation:

Before there can be a change in that policy decision-making process, before we can actually have the change happen, there will be a long way for us to prepare it, and there will be a lot of joint efforts made from the business sector, made from nonprofit sector, or maybe from the academia.

Li Shengyuan, a member of the Communist Youth League, proclaimed to me that the Communist Party was her “faith” (*xinyang*). She believed that over the course of a “few hundred years” the Communist Party would eventually realize a utopian communist society:

Interviewer: So as far as you’re concerned, what is the ideal end point (of China’s progression under CCP leadership)?

Respondent: I probably can’t see that. Regarding things I can’t see, I won’t think about it. But I think we will reach the beginning stages of a communist society. Everyone has needs that need to be met. But based on the current situation, based on what I see, humanity’s selfishness can’t be changed in just a few hundred years, but that doesn’t mean that in a few thousand years this selfishness can’t be reduced, and in the end realize communism, but that will happen far in the future, we are just starting now.

Li Shengyuan places China in a historical timeline that is thousands of years long. In her view, it is unrealistic to expect major change in “just a few hundred years.” Rather, she believes that China, through the guidance of the Communist Party, is just beginning what she probably learned in school as “the primary stage of socialism.” By viewing the nation or “humanity,” rather than class, as the primary unit of analysis, and placing their nation in a narrative which is thousands of years long, these respondents elide class conflict and evade a sense of urgency about reducing inequality.

### **Chinese Elites Self-Emplotment into Narratives of Patriotic Innovation**

Entrepreneurs were associated with stories of elite young people taking a risk by bucking convention. These stories seemed to captivate many young Chinese urbanites, particularly those in the volunteer world. On several occasions, Chinese university students living in the Beijing district of Wudaokou took me to a food stand which had been opened by entrepreneurial students from one of Beijing’s most prestigious universities, Tsinghua University. This stand, which sold a traditional meat in bun snack from Shandong, was located in a shopping plaza in front of Tsinghua University and often had lines of customers nearly half a block long. What attracted these customers were not merely the meat buns sold at the stand. Instead, this meat bun stand’s popularity came from its charming story: rather than follow the usual elite student route of joining the Communist Party or taking a high-salary position at a large company, several young graduates from Tsinghua University decided to open a meat bun stand

together. Not only were these Tsinghua graduates entrepreneurial, they also seemed to be celebrating traditional Chinese culture by selling such a quintessentially northeast Chinese snack. Their intrepidity had paid off, for the stand was now highly profitable. Nearby, the purveyors of a juice and sandwich stand hoped to emulate the meat bun stand's success, conspicuously proclaiming on their signboard, "This stand was opened by graduates from Beijing University!"

Not everyone was equally impressed by the Tsinghua meat bun stand. I often ate at a much less popular meat bun and noodle shop across the street which was frequented by office workers. When an excited elderly lady clutching a newspaper clipping burst into the shop to ask for directions to the "Tsinghua graduate meat bun stand," I was the only one who seemed to know what she was talking about.

The Tsinghua graduates who opened the meat bun stand represent a specific kind of ideal citizen in contemporary China. They embody the combination of the traditional status marker of an elite education, the risk-taking qualities of the successful modern capitalist, the cultural patriotism of a good Chinese citizen, and down-to-earth taste which reflects the egalitarianism of Xi Jinping's much-touted "socialist value system" and "mass line education." Their unconventional and entrepreneurial spirit may not be universally respected, but is celebrated by many highly-educated upper-class Chinese millennials. Moreover, celebration of entrepreneurship dovetails with the discourse of current Chinese Communist Party leadership, who promote "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) as the driving force of China's continued development.

Chinese students returning from elite universities overseas profess a similar sense of optimism, efficacy and collective purpose as Communist Party members. However, although they claim to be motivated by patriotism, their narrative is more individualistic and elitist than the "China Dream" of official government propaganda. This self-image and subjectivity is vividly celebrated in an article entitled "The Bostonians," in which the reputed author Shen Danqi, herself a Chinese doctoral student at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, describes an elite cohort of Chinese young adults who studied in Boston but returned to China to helm a variety of projects. The article begins:

In this world there is no place like Boston, this many elite universities in such a small area, and the highest concentration of overseas Chinese students. Boston not only provides them with knowledge and social networks, it also encourages challenge and innovation, helping these elite students to gain self-knowledge. Step into the world of the “Bostonians” from China.

The highest concentration of overseas Chinese students is concentrated in this city with a stable resident population of only 3 million. They are sons and daughters of the rich and powerful, the middle class, and the poor. Finally, they are the sons and daughters of Boston. Boston and its elite universities have molded an entirely new generation of elite overseas Chinese students. Boston not only provides them with knowledge and social networks, it encourages challenge and innovation, helping these elite students to gain self-knowledge and reconstruct their families, communities, nation, and even global relations.

As an entirely new generation of world-class elites with Chinese blood, what they most pay attention to is not wealth, fame, or power. They are no longer stampeding toward jobs in listed companies and investment banks. What they possess is creativity and momentum enacted with precision, as well as the ambition to improve this world: Yang Linfeng’s Sunshine Library, which brings an all-inclusive proposal to solve China’s rural education problem; Ping Chuan’s Charm Salon, which allows overseas Chinese students to conduct self-directed humanities research. Liu Shao and his colleagues left the world of investment consulting, and with his MBA degree in hand opened a chain of kebab restaurants all across the United States, before returning to do the same in Beijing. And then there is Chen Ying, Zhang Wenji . . . in addition to skill and ability, Boston has given each one of them a different vision and form.

“Sometimes, it is just this bit of clear intuition that can allow someone to make a radically different choice, possessing brand new qualities, even allowing priceless courage and efficacy to spring forth. I am deeply grateful to you for this.” Sooner or later, the world will thank them, this group of “Bostonians” who are transforming China (Gentleman’s Quarterly China 2013).

The narrative of these “Bostonians . . . transforming China” links the rise of this small group of “elite overseas Chinese students” to the rise of the entire nation. While these “Bostonians” differ markedly in their specific pursuits, the author links the owner of a chain of kebab restaurants with the founder of an educational NGO by pointing to their shared elite status, “creativity” and “ambition to improve this world.” In this narrative, entrepreneurial elites of all kinds are the vanguards of positive change.

### **Framing Individual Wealth as National Progress**

Upper-class Chinese people may frame the wealth of their own social strata as representative of the well-being and success of China as a whole. By highlighting their identity “as a Chinese” relative to

non-Chinese, they elide discussion of their own privilege relative to other Chinese people. A staff member of the volunteer organization DreamAction posted a link to the following online essay on her Facebook page (Li 2015). While this DreamAction volunteer did not write the essay, her linking to it on Facebook implies that she endorses at least some of its message. I analyze the essay below, as it vividly illustrates how upper-class Chinese, particularly those who have studied or are living abroad, may render China's inequalities and their own privilege invisible through a narrative of national progress. This narrative elides contemporary inequality between Chinese social strata by presenting China as a unified whole and by comparing the nation's present to the nation's past:

My name is Yinuo Li. I grew up in China, got my PhD in Molecular Biology in the US and worked for 10 years at McKinsey & Company, both in the US and China. In May 2015 I left McKinsey as a partner and became Director for the China Program for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Starting week 6 of my tenure at the foundation, I've been sending a biweekly email to foundation colleagues, titled "Get Smart on China". I wanted to introduce a perspective on China from a common Chinese's point of view. These notes do not represent the Foundation's view in anyway. They have been surprisingly popular among my colleagues, with many sharing back their thoughts with me and forwarding the notes to their friends. (Li 2015)

Despite being in a position of exceptional privilege compared to most Chinese citizens, and perhaps being an American citizen herself, the author claims to share "a perspective on China from a common Chinese's point of view." Moreover, in the following note, she frequently references her own affluent and privileged lifestyle as representative of the progress attained by Chinese people, and the Chinese nation, as a whole.

Dear all,

This is not a planned issue, but given today is a special day in China, I typed up this note last night.

9.3 is a holiday in China this year, with a big Victory Day Parade in Beijing (took place last night PST) in celebration of the 70th anniversary of victory in World War II, and for China, the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

On Sep 2nd 1945, China accepted the Japanese surrender, after 14 years devastating of war, which started with Japan's invasion of the northeast provinces of China in 1931. The government then decided that the following day, 9.3, would be a national holiday to celebrate this hard-earned victory.

Before the parade today, there were concerns in the western media around China's intention to show off its military might. I will not go into a debate on this (although notably Xi did make a major announcement at the beginning of the parade that China would cut its military force by 300K people, the largest cut since the 1997 cut of 500K) but wanted to share my view and reflections as a common Chinese person.

On WeChat (the largest social media platform in China), postings regarding this parade are overwhelmingly positive, including postings from my own "friend circle", many of them in the US. People invited to view the parade live come from all walks of life. At least 3 people I know were invited to go; one is a close friend of mine a professor in a leading university in China, one is a mid-level government official (who is also a mother and a novelist in her spare time), and one is a returnee scientist who currently heads R&D in a local pharma company.

Again, the author frames her note as "my view and reflections as a common Chinese person." She then claims that WeChat postings are overwhelmingly positive, though she does not explain how she knows this, since one can typically only see the posts of one's friends. She claims that "people invited to view the parade live come from all walks of life," yet her examples all seem drawn from China's elite: one is a close friend of mine a professor in a leading university in China, one is a mid-level government official (who is also a mother and a novelist in her spare time), and one is a returnee scientist who currently heads R&D in a local pharma company." Thus, she implies that the elite status of her and her friends is representative of all Chinese people.

The emotion behind this positivity is not for the "show" itself, rather a memory of history and the long way China has come in these 70 years. As I wrote in an earlier issue, the ~ 100 years of history in China following the 1840 Opium War has been an endless stretch of darkness – invasion, defeat, failure and humiliation. Troops from multiple countries came and invaded, looted, and colonized . . . The 1945 victory was China's first in a stretch of 105 years.

In contrast to how people may have experienced WWII in the US, having an invasion at home feels rather different. The Japanese army was also notorious for its brutality. My grandmother was born in 1923 in Shandong province in northern China. In 1941 the Japanese army started to implement the "3 completely" policy in northern China, namely "kill completely, burn completely and loot completely", wiping many villages down to the ground. She saw her own aunt, who was in her 50s then, raped by 10+ Japanese soldiers and her cousin killed by them with bayonets ("there were more than 20 holes in his body when we got it back"). My grandfather had many of such stories himself, one I remember vividly is his account of how the villagers hid in a cave when the troops came; fearing the Japanese may find them, the mothers covered the crying babies' mouth so tight that they suffocated them to death.

With suffering and memories like these, it's not hard to understand the ecstasy people enjoyed in 1945 when the victory came. "We took cotton out of our quilts, our cotton jackets, anything we could find, to make torches, lit it and danced all night with tears. We couldn't believe those many years of darkness were over" said a 93-year-old lady during a TV interview, remembering this day 70 years ago.

China has come a long way. Xi said in his speech that "War is like a mirror; looking at it helps us better appreciate the value of peace. Today peace and development have become the prevailing trend . . . we must learn the lessons of history and dedicate ourselves to peace . . . In the interests of peace, we need to foster a keen sense of global community with a shared future. Prejudice, discrimination, hatred and war can only cause disaster and suffering, while mutual respect, equality, peaceful development and common prosperity represent the right path to take". These statements resonate with many Chinese.

Many of the postings on social media in China are people sharing old pictures and stories of their grandparents, reflecting how much the country had changed from a place of despair and devastation to independence and prosperity. This sentiment is quite a contrast to what's on the western media, most of which took a distant and detached observer role in their coverage. They all seem to be busy coming up with smart opinions and judgments of this event, as a habitual behavior when it comes any topics related to China, with a lack of empathy and little effort of even trying to understand the historical context for this event.

The author notes that the country has "changed from a place of despair and devastation to independence and prosperity." This statement rings true if one looks at the nation as a whole. At the same time, the "sentiment" inspired by the idea that China has changed from "a place of despair" to a place of "prosperity" may obscure the poverty of a significant percentage of the population. Moreover, the claim of "independence," obscures continuing, and in some cases increasing, restrictions on ethnic, sexual, religious, and political minorities. The claim that China is a place of "independence" certainly refers to national sovereignty. However, the rest of note suggests that to the author, "independence" may also refer to the freedom to consume products, freedom which only someone of a similar level of privilege as the author could enjoy.

On a personal level, I also found something profound in the 3 generations of my own family: from my grandparents, who lived through war and poverty and a time when "death was an everyday thing" (my grandma had 14 siblings; only 3 lived to adulthood), to my parents, who lived through the famine in the 60s and the dark "cultural revolution" of the 70s, to me, sitting here now, with the best technology at my fingertips, writing a note like this to you all.

The author contrasts her grandparents' experience of "war and poverty and a time when 'death was an everyday thing'" with her own life, "with the best technology at my fingertips, writing a note like this to you all." She frames her own access to "the best technology," as well as her ability to communicate in English with a Western audience, as symbolic of the rise of the Chinese nation, rather than an indication of her own privilege.

The author ends her note with an image to emphasize the buying power and consumer choice that she associates with modern China<sup>4</sup>:

To end this note, I'd like to show you this picture below – a screen shot from Alibaba's Taobao, the largest e-commerce website in China. 30 minutes after President Xi and Madam Peng started their official greeting on TV, you could already buy Madam Peng's dress on Taobao for 999 RMB (~\$120 USD). This is China.

By ending a note about the military parade and China's rise from devastation to prosperity with a picture from Taobao, the author linked commerce and consumption with national salvation. The author may have intended to show that Chinese people are now wealthy enough to buy a dress worth \$120 USD. The author may also have wanted to show the individual freedom and egalitarianism of contemporary China, where common citizens can wear the same clothes as the leaders. The author ended the note with the sentence "This is China," again presenting China as a unified, if not homogenous, whole that is prosperous and free.

Is this national frame only meant to obscure poverty from foreigners, or do upper-class Chinese also use this frame to obscure poverty from their own view? On the one hand, identity is situational, and certain situations are likely to make national identity more salient than other forms of identity, such as class or hometown. On the other hand, Chinese media, schools and individuals actively make national identity salient by framing China as a unified entity, comparing China to other countries, and presenting

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<sup>4</sup> The author may have received some negative reactions to this last paragraph, as she deleted it from her article on medium.com, but not from the original note on her WeChat blog, available here: [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MzA3NDMyOTcxMQ==&mid=210365512&idx=1&sn=a325044688f50dc89f14b60d72194667](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NDMyOTcxMQ==&mid=210365512&idx=1&sn=a325044688f50dc89f14b60d72194667)



perceived Western perceptions of China. Portraying the nation as the primary unit of identity allows one to elide inequalities within the nation. Chinese citizens may also be more likely to identify with the nation of China as a whole when abroad (Hail 2015), and it is upper-class Chinese who have the most ability to study or travel abroad. Thinking of oneself as a representative of one's nation, rather than one's class, allows upper-class Chinese to think of their own conspicuous consumption as patriotic. This narrative of national progress can seamlessly encompass both capitalism and militarism, as the author displayed in her essay and Xi Jinping in his speech at the military parade.

## CHAPTER 6:

### DO CHINESE VOLUNTEERS CARE ABOUT INEQUALITY?

Survey data shows that over 80% of Chinese citizens believe that the gap between rich and poor is a serious problem. We know little, however, about why they see it as a problem. Do Chinese citizens believe that inequality is inherently problematic, or are they primarily concerned about problems associated with the rich-poor gap, such as corruption and social conflict? In this chapter, I investigate why inequality is perceived as acceptable in some cases but not in others. I find that upper-class Chinese see inequality as a problem because it could threaten social stability. However, they claim that redistribution is bad for national prosperity and national character.

#### **Inequality as Functional**

Much like the Americans described by Kluegel and Smith (1986), most of my Chinese respondents, including those from the Communist Youth League, believed that individuals were largely responsible for their own economic success or failure. They also framed inequality as functional for the overall prosperity of society.

Respondent (Bo Weihai, CYL, male): This problem [of a gap between rich and poor] is the same as in other countries with a market economy. For example, if you are a factory boss, then your distance from ordinary people will get bigger and bigger . . . Since we were little we've seen China's market economy being gradually established, we can clearly sense the changes are—that is, most of the changes have been positive. Most people, including my parents, won't support a completely planned economy. The problem is we don't really know what communism is. Those new leftists are idealists, they say that today's problems are brought by the market economy, but actually I think those problems are brought by some things that have accompanied the market economy, such as the importance of interpersonal relationships, the existence of monopolies—these things are not intrinsically part of the market economy.

This respondent explains the gap between the rich and poor as a natural consequence of a market economy, but suggests that marketization has been beneficial for the nation in general. Though he acknowledges that marketization has brought some problems, he believes that the solution is to reduce nepotism and monopolies rather than resort to redistributive policies.

Other respondents also remarked that the gap between rich and poor was tied to “society’s development”:

Interviewer: Is the gap between the rich and poor an important problem?

Respondent (Li Yuan Ming, Beautiful China volunteer, female): I think the gap between rich and the poor is an important problem. I think the gap between the rich and poor can lead to some people being born with many resources, and others being born lacking resources. The environment in which you group up will influence your future development, so it will increase the future gap. But in a republic, the republic can do some things to help the poor have a path upwards, and not face so many obstacles, and can make the poor use their own ability to achieve some success, I think this is very good. Because if we have this gap, it will motivate people to work hard. If a country’s welfare is really good, some people might be really lazy. If a lazy person receives as much as a really hardworking person then I think this isn’t good for society’s development.

In contrast to emphasizing the individual’s right to keep what she earns, Yuan Ming uses functionalist language, claiming that inequality improves people’s character and society as a whole by motivating people to work hard. When inequality hinders the ability of the poor to achieve success through hard work, however, she supports government intervention.

Some respondents believed that the state should play a role in maintaining a level of equality of opportunity which preserved both meritocracy and the motivating function of inequality.

Interviewer: Is the gap between the rich and poor a big problem?

Respondent (Lin Yongheng, CYL, male): I think that some gap between rich and poor is very normal. Without this gap, people will feel no motivation to work hard. But the problem is when the gap gets too large. If it gets too large, then poor people feel that no matter how hard they work they have no chance to get ahead, and rich people feel that no matter how degenerate (*duoluo*) they are, even if they don’t work, they will never lose their wealth. So the government should take some measures to control this gap.

This respondent begins by justifying some degree of inequality as “normal” and functional for society: “Without this gap, people will feel no motivation to work hard.” Moreover, he implies that inequality also improves people’s character by motivating them to work hard. On the other hand, he believes that it is the government’s role to preserve some semblance of meritocracy, so that people still feel that hard work brings success and laziness brings failure. Thus, this respondent frames inequality as being functional for

society's development, but also maintains that the government must take action to preserve a functional level of inequality. By justifying inequality through its function, rather than through the ideal of individual freedom, he can justify allowing the government to play a central role in society.

Another Communist Youth League member justified a degree of inequality as being “natural”:

Interviewee: Do you have any ideas about how to reduce the gap?

Respondent (Sun Nan, CYL, male): How to reduce the gap between rich and poor? I think that the gap between rich and poor is a natural phenomenon. As the economy develops, some people are very clever and others are not, some people work hard and others don't, some have good luck and some don't, this is the source of the gap between rich and poor. The important thing is what dangers does the gap between rich and poor bring? Actually, just to prevent some of the dangers is good enough. This is a tough question. Like in my department's research, we will always talk about this problem of balancing fairness with efficiency, if you urge people to go make money it will naturally increase the rich-poor gap, but it will increase efficiency, but if you protect fairness many places will create lazy people. It's hard to say . . .

This respondent maintains that inequality is a “natural” part of economic development. He ascribes inequality to individual characteristics, claiming that “As the economy develops, some people are very clever and others are not, some people work hard and other's don't,” but also acknowledges the role of “luck,” stating “some have good luck and some don't.” In addition to claiming that inequality was natural, this respondent also explained that inequality was functional for the “efficiency” of society. As a Master's student in public policy, he explained that he and his colleagues would “talk about this problem of balancing fairness with efficiency,” implying that fairness and efficiency are mutually exclusive. This also suggests it is up to the government to fulfill this difficult task of finding the right balance between fairness and efficiency.

In contrast to framing capitalism as necessary for individual freedom, respondents from the Communist Youth League tended to frame the market economy as a tool for the growth of the entire nation and the development of Chinese people's character. By justifying a *certain level* of inequality and market freedom as functional, rather than simply proclaiming the right of the individual to pursue wealth,

these respondents are able to justify the authority of the Communist Party to regulate the market and provide pathways for social mobility.

### **Inequality is a Problem When It Threatens Social Unity**

Survey data shows that the majority of Chinese citizens believe that the gap between rich and poor is a serious problem in China. My interviewees were not an exception. However, when I asked them why they thought this gap was a problem, they revealed very ambiguous feelings about inequality. Most did not feel that inequality was a problem in itself, and many felt that inequality was necessary to maintain China's development. The phrase "rich-poor gap" (*pinfu chaju*), however, symbolized social disintegration and conflict. Several interviewees were concerned that the gap between rich and poor could lead to increased social conflict.

China's social problems are an amalgamation of many problems, and the gap between rich and poor is just one manifestation. This is very hard to answer. The gap between rich and poor is very obvious in China, and this creates an attitude of hating the rich among the lower strata, which is not conducive to social stability. The gap between rich and poor affects having children, educating children. Because things are always changing, you can't stand at this point in time and judge. In China's environment it is very hard to make long term predictions, so it's hard to say. (Li Shengyuan, CYL, female)

And another very important point is that the gap between rich and poor is so large, it leads to a situation where those on top have an extremely limited understanding of those on the bottom, and those on the bottom have an extremely limited understanding of those on the top. For example, I noticed a problem, some people ask what those people who spend 100,000 yuan per square meter for an apartment are thinking, this is an extremely typical attitude of the middle or lower strata, "Those people who spend 100,000 yuan on a square meter, what are they thinking?" Actually they have no understanding of each other. That is to say, China's middle class is still not fully developed, and the upper strata's understanding of the lower strata is very low. Actually, I don't know what those people who spend 100,000 yuan per square meter apartments are thinking. But actually, maybe they have 100 million, spending 10 million for a house is nothing. This kind of understanding is lacking, there is no communication, no understanding, you will always lack that kind of empathy, you just have no way. Those on top perhaps have no thought of helping those below, of helping everyone get along better, and those on the bottom will feel that those on top are selfish and unjust for the sake of wealth, they exploit or something like that, and this is really not a good situation. (Yao Wenbing, Beautiful China volunteer, male)

Respondents from both NGOs and the Communist Youth League tended to frame the rising gap between rich and poor as a threat to social stability and social unity. In particular, they warned of the dangers of

poor people “hating the rich.” They were hesitant, however, to say that economic inequality was inherently unfair, exploitative, or harmful to the poor.

### **Inequality in a Context of International Competition**

There is a long history of viewing the United States as both a rival and a model for China’s development (Liu and Berkowitz 2014). My respondents framed redistribution as harmful to the development of Chinese culture and character, and framed a free market involving the lending of capital as essential for modernity and prosperity. My respondents cited several ways in which they believed that Chinese should become more thrifty and entrepreneurial, attributes they sometimes associated with Americans and invariably with Jews, yet avoid become lazy and dependent, attributes they sometimes associated with Americans, as well as Africans, Greeks, and others. These cultural changes, they claimed, would help more Chinese to become prosperous and resolve some of the problems of inequality in China:

Interviewer: Do some families choose not to send their children to college because they can’t afford the tuition?

Respondent (CYL, male): I think this is related to Chinese culture. There’s a story about an old American woman and an old Chinese woman. The two women both made the same amount of money, but the American woman lived in a nice house her whole life and the Chinese woman was never able to buy a house. This is because the American woman took out a loan to buy a house for herself when she was young. She was able to pay back the loan on the house within 20 years, and after that use her salary to live a comfortable lifestyle. The Chinese woman, on the other hand, was afraid to take a loan, so she kept saving money on her own. Meanwhile, the price of housing went up and up. She never managed to save enough money for a house. So you can see, in China people aren’t used to taking loans, so it’s very hard for a farmer to improve his life.

Another respondent based her skepticism toward charity toward the poor on her perception of Africans, claiming that giving things to poor people could lead them to become dependent and lazy:

Before I graduated from university I went to volunteer in Africa for seven weeks . . . When I saw the situation there I had to think things over (*fanxing*). Everyone’s impression was that Africa is an extremely backwards, poor place, and there are a lot of NGOs that work over there. The impression that Africans gave me is that they are very lazy. They take it for granted [uses English here], for example they will ask to borrow money from you and won’t pay it back, and if you buy some food for yourself and put it in your house they will take it away to eat. They think it’s a matter of course, they think that as long as you aren’t black then you must have money and you should help them. But I really don’t think it should be this way. Two years later I was in Yunnan, and there were

a lot of Chinese paying attention to public service, paying attention to these communities that need help. But many people there, they actually aren't very rich, they have a stable income, a bit high, they have this kind of desire to go help people, but I think they have a kind of attitude of looking down from high, they think "You poor people have a difficult life, so I will go help you." But if they go with this attitude then the people they help will develop an attitude of "I am really poor, I don't understand anything, so you should help me." So I discussed with my friends, and we decided that China's remote areas should never become like that situation in Africa. Because I think that real change only comes from you making a change from inside, so a person or a place should decide for themselves that they want to change, they need this motivation to change (Beautiful China, female).

This respondent claims to oppose many forms of aid to the poor because she is concerned about its effects on the character of rural Chinese people. She frames the withholding of aid as being in the best interests of the poor, and in the interest of preventing China's remote areas from becoming "like that situation in Africa." Thus, rather than oppose redistribution as "stealing from the rich," or limiting individual freedom, she justifies her opposition to redistribution as being in the interest of cultivating good character among Chinese rural people.

My Chinese informants' perceptions of Western countries, including my informants' ideas about how race operated in these countries, contributed to their opposition to income redistribution. Some told me that they had heard that Black people in the United States received free money from the government, and this caused them to be lazy and unwilling to make an effort to become socially mobile. Several Chinese who had not been abroad asked me whether it was true that Americans receive money from the government when they are unemployed. When I responded to one Chinese hairdresser by telling her that some Americans do receive unemployment insurance, but that the amount they receive is small, she responded that "This is why you Americans are so lazy. If we Chinese don't work we won't survive. You don't know how to 'eat the northwest wind' like us Chinese." Several Chinese college students expressed their opposition to the government providing too many social benefits on the grounds that this would cause China to go the way of Greece. They believed that the social benefits provided by the Greek government had caused it to run up excessive debt while making its people lazy. These students told me of their admiration for Germany, which they saw as a model of hard work, individual and social

responsibility, and high-quality production. In fact, there are enough Chinese young adults who sing Germany's praises that there is a somewhat popular term among Chinese young adults which describes these people—"Germany braggers" (*de chui*).

While these informants expressed concern that the rich-poor gap could threaten social harmony and social mobility, they also saw some inequality as necessary and were opposed to redistributive measures. In expressing their views on these issues, they frequently drew upon their perceptions of how other countries' social policies shaped the strengths and weaknesses of their respective national characters. In their view, a competitive market-based system was not only good for the economy, it was also essential for cultivating a modern Chinese citizenry, marked by entrepreneurialism, innovation, and industriousness.

### **Equality of Respect**

Several interviewees said that the most important kind of inequality in China was not material, but rather an inequality of respect and treatment accorded to different individuals depending on how much money and power they were assumed to have:

Respondent: (Xie Guihong, DreamAction, male): The biggest inequality, I feel, is probably social position . . . When you meet a person, they will immediately judge which social position, which location you are right now located in, and they will react to you based on that . . . For example, if we want to go to a restaurant, the servant, you will judge the servant as someone to who can do whatever you want, because you come to serve me. Another example is when you go to the bank, the role changed, you are now the customer, the banker thinks that they are actually higher than you, so you must wait, if they want you to wait, if they want you to be in a line, they can do that. So you and the people sitting behind the glass door, it is unequal . . .

Interviewer: I see. And what do you think is a way to resolve this problem?

Respondent: The way to resolve this is education, probably. The people who treat others in this way are right now in their 40s and 50s. Those people experienced a really hard time in their early age, so they didn't get the good life which they should deserve from the society in that period. So they inherit how the people treated them, and then treat the others when they have the opportunity for the young people...

Interviewer: So you feel that young people today, how is their environment different? Why would it make them treat people better?



Respondent: Because they have more resources. That is a part from their family. They feel more loved by others. ...

Interviewer: So you feel your parents care more about social position?

Respondent: Yes. Most people my parents' age say "China is a society that cares about status" (*zhongguo shi yi ge guan benwei shehui*). They judge people based on how high the rank is of an official...

Interviewer: So you're saying that people judge based on rank. But what about how much money you have? Do people judge more or less?

Respondent: Huh, very interesting question. In our generation, yes. My friends, my circles of friends are very limited. Even though my circle of friends judges people by money, very true. For example, if the people that are possessing a lot of wealth and do something, then the friends in that circle tend to be more friendly to them (*rexin*)...When people are choosing friends, the young people seem to be searching for social allies, even at their age, it is very obvious.

Despite the fact that Guihong earlier told me that the gap between rich and poor was too large, he felt optimistic about equality of respect between Chinese people of different social status. Although his parents' generation lived in a materially more equal time, Guihong associated his parents' generation with a tendency to treat people differently according to status. This reflects the fact that Maoist China, although materially relatively equal, still maintained a strict social hierarchy based on political status and class background. Thus, even as China's gap between rich and poor grows, some young people believe that China is undergoing a general trend toward egalitarianism because they view wealth inequality as more natural than government-imposed inequalities in status. However, when I pressed Guihong to think about how wealth now affects how Chinese people treat each other, he acknowledged that even in his circle of college friends people will give preferential treatment to those with wealth, believing that making connections to such people will benefit themselves.

Respondents' acceptance of a certain level of inequality was facilitated by their belief that China's destiny was to become a "developed country." Since developed countries were similarly unequal, only a highly competitive economic system would help Chinese people to develop economically, politically, and culturally. On the other hand, respondents worried that too much inequality could cause social instability, particularly if poor people began "hating the rich." Communist Youth League members

maintained that the government should “standardize” social institutions to provide all citizens with better social services and more opportunities for social mobility. One Communist Youth League member, for example, recommended homogenizing the college entrance exam so that students from every province had an equal chance of gaining admission to a top university. NGO volunteers, on the other hand, were more likely to suggest marketization, diversity of educational choices, and technological innovation as solutions for inequality of opportunity. Moreover, they suggested that the solution to the threat of social instability was to promote an egalitarian perspective in which people treated each other with respect regardless of how much money they had.

## **CHAPTER 7:**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study attempted to answer three main questions: Do Chinese urbanites care about inequality? Why do they care or not care about inequality? How do they maintain their own attitudes toward inequality? I examined young adults who volunteered in the countryside as one case of Chinese urbanites. I argued that this group perceives economic inequality as normal. They believe that inequality is natural and ubiquitous, is necessary for China's development, and motivates people to work hard. They draw upon mainstream cultural discourses to talk about inequality, but also individually and collectively engage in narrative practices and styles of talk to maintain their attitudes toward inequality when faced with contradictions.

NGO volunteers are not necessarily representative of China's young urban upper class. They certainly saw themselves as different from their peers—more autonomous, more willing to take risks, more altruistic, more worldly and less materialistic. What, then, can this study tell us about contemporary China? I suggest that the existence of these kinds of volunteers and volunteer discourse is made possible by economic and cultural trends currently taking place in China.

NGO volunteers tended to come from moderately wealthy families. They did not count themselves among the super-rich, who could buy luxury cars and jewelry at a whim, but they acknowledged that they did not have to worry about money while growing up and they do not expect to financially support their parents when they get older. Free from pressing material need, they did not perceive established institutions such as the Chinese educational system and the Communist Party as avenues for social mobility. Rather, they viewed these institutions as restrictive. Having learned about the “West” from Chinese people who have lived abroad, or having lived abroad themselves, upper-class Chinese young people seek to imitate what they perceive to be the autonomy of Western young people. They also believe that they are capable of combining the best of Chinese and Western culture and thereby helping China to develop.

Urban Chinese young adults, despite their privileged social position, also find themselves in competition with each other for spots at elite universities and jobs, or compete for investors as entrepreneurs. Thus, they seek ways to distinguish themselves from other privileged urbanites. One way to distinguish themselves is by portraying themselves as more independent and self-directed than their peers. In particular, those who apply for spots at elite American universities make efforts to distance themselves from negative stereotypes about Chinese students, namely that they are conformist and do not engage in independent thinking. Thus, they told narratives of volunteerism which emphasized their autonomy, leadership skills, and altruism.

Although the market economy normalizes hierarchical interactions, growing inequality poses the threat of social conflict. Thus, China's idealistic young urbanites seek to bridge the gap between social strata rather than eliminate it. Rather than pursue economic equality or equality of opportunity, they claim to pursue "equality of respect." They elide discussion of material inequality through the language of egalitarianism.

Like volunteers' narratives, the Chinese government's "China Dream" discourse is at once egalitarian and individualistic. Government discourse calls for greater understanding and unity between all Chinese people, but also encourages individual aspiration and effort. Leaders use a Western narrative of progress through innovation to justify neoliberal policies, while also drawing upon Chinese narratives of predestined glory to assert that any current social problems are temporary and that Chinese people will inevitably find prosperity in a "free market." Both the China Dream narrative and the Western neoliberal narrative create master narratives for volunteers' own narratives about the long-term effects of their volunteerism and their post-volunteer entrepreneurial activities. Individuals agentially draw on these templates to emplot their own privileged lifestyles and individualistic ambitions within a larger narrative of national renewal, thus obscuring the source of their privilege and valorizing their ambitions.

The implications of this study apply beyond contemporary China. Privileged people in capitalist societies attribute themselves with the positive characteristic of autonomy, which obscures the source of

their privilege. This has important implications for how we understand the role of “agency” in reproducing inequality. Moreover, privileged people everywhere use narratives and styles of talk to construct symbolic boundaries, obscure social boundaries and legitimate inequality. The legitimation of inequality is an ongoing process in which agentic actors constantly adjust and respond to critiques and contradictions emanating from the development of capitalism. Finally, this study adds to understanding of how privileged actors define their relationship to marginalized groups in a way which helps them to compete, cultivate relationships, or otherwise define their identities within their own privileged strata.

World society theorists posit that agentic actorhood is a social construction. They maintain that while most people once attributed their reality to unseen or uncontrollable forces, people now operate under the assumption that various entities—individuals, organizations, countries—are capable of rationally calculating and acting in their own best interest. However, these entities must take upon certain characteristics in order to be accepted as rational actors within world society. Individuals, for example, are expected to receive a universal, standardized form of education, while nations are expected to have distinct borders and pursue economic growth. Moreover, world society theorists point out that certain actors are granted legitimacy as “disinterested others” who are capable of determining what is in the best interests of other actors. World society theory has proven useful in explaining why institutions across the world increasingly come to resemble each other. However, few have attempted to investigate the role of the social construction of agentic actorhood in the legitimation of inequality.

The subjects of my study constantly spoke of the importance of making independent decisions and eschewed following others. They claimed that every individual person should have their own dream, feel motivated to pursue that dream, and follow a rational plan of action to realize that dream. To my subjects, whether or not one realized their dream was not as important as their having a dream in the first place. Thus, the subjects of my study promoted the world society conception of agentic actorhood, particularly individual agentic actorhood, for they claimed that each individual person should have a clearly defined interest and should pursue that interest.

The subjects of my study contributed to the legitimation of inequality when they determined that poor, rural people were unaware of what was truly in their best interest. Volunteers operated under the assumption that poor rural people's minds had to be liberated from rural ways of thinking in order for them to escape poverty, or in order for them to realize that they were not really poor in the first place. By framing the poor as followers who need to be taught how to dream, privileged people attribute poverty to psychological and cultural, rather than structural causes. Moreover, by framing marginalized groups as incapable of making independent, rational decisions, privileged people can justify withholding money, freedom of mobility, access to elite institutions, and other resources from them.

The subjects of my study legitimated economic, political, and social privilege by framing privileged lifestyles as expressions of autonomy. They spoke with admiration about people who lived "unique" lifestyles, like playing in a rock band, traveling the world, or starting their own business. They attributed these lifestyles to individual characteristics: unconventional thinking, a keen understanding of one's own desires, self-confidence, creativity, and a willingness to take risks. Respondents refrained from discussing the social inequality which made these lifestyles accessible to only a small portion of the population. Moreover, they held fast to the principle that every person should be able to live as they wanted and spend their money as they wanted, so long as they were pursuing individual dreams and not merely trying to keep up with trends.

The subjects of my study also contributed to the legitimation of inequality when they constructed narratives which described how individual elites pursuing their self-interest would eventually create a better world for everyone. These narratives conflate the success of a few with the success of the entire nation. Moreover, rather than directly explain how these elites are going to improve society, these narratives portray an upward trajectory with an ambiguous, yet inevitably positive, conclusion.

Finally, the subjects of my study contributed to the legitimation of inequality by actively avoiding and discouraging discussion of structural inequalities. They framed talk of structural inequality as anti-individual and inauthentic, while framing talk which obscured structural inequality as pro-individual and

egalitarian. Moreover, they dismissed talk of politics as empty rhetoric or self-interested grandstanding. In rejecting political talk, however, they implicitly endorsed the politics of the status quo.

What does this mean for how we understand the role of “agency” in reproducing inequality? I argue that while agentic actorhood is indeed a social construction, it is privileged elites who are most able to institutionalize their own definitions and criteria of agency. These classed definitions and criteria of agency help legitimate inequality. NGO founders, staff, and volunteers had access to elite social networks which provided funding for NGO activities, and staff often supplemented their relatively meager NGO salaries with money from their parents. These NGOs institutionalized upper-class-inflected definitions of agency, which mandated the pursuit of post-materialist goals such as self-knowledge and individual expression rather than goals more immediately pertinent to poor people, such as economic and health security. According to these NGOs, the truly agentic individual knows and can verbalize a post-materialist dream. Similarly, several elite Chinese universities favor students from large cities by claiming that these students know how to think independently and possess more “quality,” referring to their supposedly wide range of interests and experiences. Thus, both the definitions and the criteria used by institutions to determine whether or not one is an agentic actor tend to favor the privileged.

My study also shows that there is a relationship between “vertical” and “horizontal” symbolic boundaries. Privileged actors define their relationship to marginalized groups in a way which helps them to compete, cultivate relationships, or otherwise define their identities within their own privileged strata. Volunteers claimed to care about and respect marginalized groups, and as volunteers’ college admissions essays made clear, they used this distinction to compete with other privileged peers. Moreover, volunteers practiced the identity of capable leader, an identity which could serve them in their future careers, by attempting to inspire or otherwise persuade rural people to think and act differently.

The subjects of this study also did many things which helped to reduce inequality or at least address some of the symptoms of poverty. Most students in rural schools appeared very happy to have volunteers who paid attention to them, played with them, showed concern for them, and interrupted the

dreariness of everyday routines. The students appeared genuinely grateful for donated books, and they clearly enjoyed learning the songs, dances, games and lessons taught by the volunteers. Certainly, some rural students were inspired by volunteers' messages of dreaming big and working hard, and this may have a measurable impact on their lives. However, decades of social science research have shown that a significant, long-term reduction of inequality will require a change in the social structures which distribute opportunities unequally, and not merely a change in poor people's mindsets. Until more people are willing to openly recognize, talk about, and work to remove structural barriers to opportunity, inequality will continue to rise.



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