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THE IMPACT OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM: CASE STUDY OF MEIXIAN TEAM

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Abstract:

Volunteer tourism has been growing as an important segment of youth tourism. It generates significant impacts on both the volunteers and the host community. This paper takes Meixian Team (Meixian Dui) as the case study. College students in Guangzhou, Southeast China, travel to Meixian County to help with primary teaching in rural Guangdong Province. This paper sheds light on how volunteer experience impacts on the participants of volunteer tourism, and how the volunteers transform the host community. Young volunteers develop their personalities during their journey of helping rural children with limited resource. These volunteer tourists manifest how their experience resulted in shifts in personal attitude and world views of Chinese colleague students. In the meantime, the short stay of the volunteers brings changes in the host community, although the sustainability of the benefits to the local villages remains questionable.

Keywords:

Change, China, Development, host, Rural, Socialisation, Travel, Volunteer, Youth

JEL Classification: M29

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Introduction

There has been significant development of volunteer tourism, and the knowledge body of volunteer tourism has been established, whether as a new tourism (Poon, 1993), niche tourism (Novelli, 2005), or new moral tourism (Butcher, 2003 and 2005). Volunteer tourism originated as a British and European phenomenon and an offshoot of the Grand Tour in the history (Wearing and McGehee, 2013). It has grown into a widespread global phenomenon as a response to the growth alternative tourism and sustainable tourism, which became popular in 1970s and early 1980s (Pearce, 1992; Wearing, 2001).

Volunteer tourism is defined as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (Wearing, 2001:1). This definition focuses on tourists who volunteer for part or all of their travels.

Volunteer tourism has expanded over both developed and developing countries across the globe. There is increasingly more youth from developed countries, such as USA and Australia, visiting developing countries in Asia and Africa for volunteer program (Alexander, 2012). However, the growth among volunteers travelling within their own country or continent for poverty alleviation and rural development appears to be even faster (Wearing and McGehee, 2013).

Volunteer tourism, or Gongyi (公益, for the public benefit) tourism in China, has witnessed substantial growth from late 1990s in China and Hong Kong, with the majority of the participants being students in the tertiary sector (Lo and Lee, 2011). Most Chinese youth volunteers are domestic travellers from cities in East China to work in the rural areas or the western part of China to help poorer regions. There are government agencies and college administration staff engaged in organising volunteer programs in China. However, there is an increasing effort among college students to start their own volunteer programs (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018). There is also growing number of Chinese college students working in programs as international volunteers, such as going to Southeast Asia and Europe to work for special events, and teach Chinese or Chinese culture in schools (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018).

This paper explores issues related Meixian Team, a volunteer program established by students in Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering in Guangzhou in 2009. The program attempts to send students from Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province in southeast China, with high per capita income, to Meixian, a mountainous and less developed region in northeast Guangdong province. The program sends youth to Meixian from July to September every year, to help with primary school teaching, villager welfare enhancement, advanced technology introduction, and cultural development. The research collects data from interviews of students who participated in Meixian Team program, with a micro-sociology perspective.

This paper starts from literature reviews on volunteer tourism and its impacts. Followed by an analysis of the data collected to provide insights on the impacts of volunteering on Chinese youth and the host communities. Discussions and implications of the case

study are presented lastly.

Literature review

1. Volunteer tourism and the participants

Volunteer tourism is a result of a wide range of motivations (Tomazos and Butler, 2010; Lepp, 2008). Volunteering provides the opportunity to escape from ordinary daily routine in order to pursue self-development (Wearing, 2001).

Volunteer tourism presents the combination of working and resting, where people of similar purpose work and live together on jobs of social significance (Clark, 1978:13; Samaraweera, 2016). Volunteers obtain enriching tourism experiences and friendship from natural and cultural environment, longer contact with the local community, combined with the power, negotiation, new social network and self-development.

The volunteer tourist experience may cause value changes and shifted consciousness, influencing both the volunteer and the host in the process of interactions (Stanczyk and Pieczka, 2016; Stoddart and Rogerson, 2004). Different from other tourists, volunteer tourists pursue a closer person-to-person interaction with the host community, and even enable experiences blend with their social values (Singh, 2004). Gradual changes may occur as the consequence of the interactions, such as community development, nature conservation, cultural renewal, and cultural hybridity (Rodin and Rodin, 2016; Uriely, Reichel and Ron, 2003). Volunteers were influenced through the interaction with the indigenous people from another culture, leading to interpersonal experience and meaningful interaction (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007).

Recreation activities within the group contain social components and construct meanings for volunteers through social interaction (Wearing, 2001). Individual and group interaction will impact upon the volunteer's sense of self and identity (Lewis, 2016; Wearing, 2001). Interactionism may then be able to be used to explain actions within a different cultural context, and help to develop cross-cultural understanding. When volunteers return home, the networks and the consciousness-raising component may continue to enrich their life (McGehee and Santos, 2005). Volunteer tourism provides activities that nurtures the positive socialisation of the participants (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018).

2. Volunteer tourism and the destinations

Volunteer tourism promotes sustainability and reciprocity, and contains the potential to promote a sense of altruism and social responsibility (Lyons and Wearing, 2008). Volunteering tourism presents a community-centred approach (Zahra and McGehee, 2013). It is closely involved in the local affairs in local communities and provides more opportunity for socialisation of the participants (Sin, 2009).

It appears that volunteer tourism contributes closely to the development of local community in direct or indirectly ways by introducing external social capital and even practical skills (McGehee and Santos, 2005). Volunteers can help to create a new

space to connect with the poorer region. Volunteering may help in understanding the complex relationship between tourism and poverty. Volunteers advocate cultural interaction and understanding between hosts and guests over a longer period of time, while both the volunteers and locals have the power to be assured of their identities and relations with each other (McGehee, 2002). Although tourism has the function of poverty-alleviation (Ball, 2009; Amos and Swuah, 2017), it is controversial in what degree tourism can improve the economy and in what circumstances it will do. Volunteer tourism presents the principal motivation of taking people to poor parts of the world to make some contribution (Crossley, 2012). The experience to interact with poverty can make people think happiness as wealth while 'do not mind' being poor (Crossley, 2012). Zahra and McGehee (2013) highlight on the relationship of social capital and poverty.

Volunteers from developed region to visit poorer areas to engage in poverty-alleviation. Meixian Team responds to the need of helping less developed areas, and sends students in Guangzhou, one of the most developed cities in China, to Meixian, a region with low per capita income in northeast Guangdong Province, to teach primary schools and to help with the rural community.

Research design

Meixian Team is a volunteer organization initiated by students in Zhongkai University of Agriculture and Engineering in Guangzhou in 2009. The program sends students from Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province, to Meixian, a mountainous and economically deprived region in northeast Guangdong province. The program sends youth to Meixian from July to September every year, to help with teaching, village affairs, and cultural development.

The research collects data from students who participated in Meixian Team program, with a micro-sociology perspective. Most of these research is qualitative due to the characteristics of the research objects.

The research attempts to understand the impacts of Meixian Team and how to improve this program by following the progress of the volunteers. As well as conducting extensive literature review to establish the theoretical framework, the author contacted students who volunteered in the program to seek participation in the research. The research collected data from personal observation, focus group discussions, and interviews. Sampling was random and voluntary. Two focus group discussions and 12 interviews were conducted in 2016. The author visited Meixian Team in August 2016 to collect data on the site. One focus group with 7 participants and seven interviews were conducted in Meixian in August 2016, while another focus group with 8 participants and 5 interviews took place in September 2016 after the volunteers came back to Guangzhou. All the interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed to improve the accuracy of data.

Twelve respondents were coded, for example, "01-wj-m", "01" for the interview order, "wj" for the name abbreviation, "m / f" for male and female.

Findings and discussions

1. Volunteer and youth development

Volunteering may have a far-reaching impact on the youth when they learn and experience while realising what they can do and what their limits are. When the youth have worked and made some difference from participating in the volunteer activities, they may internalise their confidence, which is essential in helping the youth to search for their own identity and meaning of life, as illustrated by these comments:

We are not too concerned for personal gains here when we are fighting for the same goal. When you are a volunteer, your identity is complete different. You just want to dedicate. When I change my attitude, I feel a lot happier. I have become more tolerant to my team mate and students.

(06-qq-f)

We had many activities to enhance the cooperation and division of labor between team members. Cooking and teaching required cooperation. We had to cooperate in cutting wood and fishing. The school principal helped us and we provided feedback the principal. It was a two-way cooperation.

(03-wfg-m)

Volunteers in this research share similar daily environment and ordinary roles in Guannghzhou. They are used to the traditional environment and interpersonal relationships that surrounds a young person. They are normally tertiary students and live in a routine with the university campus as the centre stage of their life. When taking part in the volunteering trip, they entre a different stage that transforms an individual youth into a volunteer. As a volunteer, the youth ventures into a new environment and transfers to new social roles, interacting with a different set of stakeholders.

There are four groups of principal stakeholders in this research as they appear to play the most important roles in volunteering, namely volunteers, organisers, local students in Meixian, and local players at the destinations in Meixian. Volunteers are organized by team instructors and administrators, who serve as the representatives of volunteer organization. Volunteers interact directly with each other in the same team. They work at the destination with teachers and principals, in combination with the local students and parents in Meixian. Although the nature of this group of stakeholders changes when the volunteer task varies across locations and projects, the essential influence of the local representation remains similar. There are two-way interactions in the forms of cooperation, adaptation, imitation and conflict (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018). The volunteers play their own social roles and interact with other social roles, including other volunteers, destination local players and volunteer organisers.

My best achievement is team building. I used to be alone. But now, I need to run a team. The perspective is different. I have to consider for the whole team instead of personal perspective.

(12-px-m)

Volunteering provides a vehicle to develop a positive outlook for the world and their

future, and the youth becomes much more considerate of other people's views and demands. For example:

We do have conflicts but overall there is no major argument. For example, when discussing the teaching method, there was dispute about whether we should have a combination of English and Chinese, or we just use English in the English class. But after some discussions we reached agreement.

(04-jhh-f)

Volunteering helps the youth to know their ability and what they can do. For example:

Volunteering allows me to know whether my personality is introverted or extroverted. Since we left familiar environment to be in a total strange place, it is easy to find our extreme ability, and to recognise our quality. I never realised that I have so much to offer until I survive in such a new environment.

(09-hfj-f)

I'm learning so much from this trip. The new team member may ask the older generation to get the lessons since they don't have any experience. Meixian Team supports local education and we used to teach primary schools in the past. But from last year community service was added in the trip, and we have to combine adult education with our trip. All this is very important for our development.

(01-hjx-m)

2. Socialisation and interaction of volunteering

Social role is an important part of identity seeking in youth development. Volunteering provides the opportunity for young people to mingle in a relatively unfamiliar social circle so they have to reset their roles. One respondent makes this observation:

A group of people, who did not have much intersection before, live and work together

with very different starting point. We have the same goal now in this journey.

We go together to remote places and need to understand each other. So, I think socialisation is the key aspect of this group.

(02-yxm-m)

The youth may achieve self-development by adapting to the new roles. Volunteering environment is unfamiliar enough for the youth to be challenged and converted to make contribution quickly. Volunteers learn from cooperation, adaption, and conflict in daily routines and unexpected events, as reflected below:

I have to train myself to be stronger physically to catch the high-intensity movement. I was a spoiled princess by my parents, and did not do much house chores at all.

This is the first time that I have to make meals for six people , as well as adapting to the relationship with the teammates and closely shared life. I am learning so much and love it.

(10-xq-f)

The shared purpose of volunteering makes it possible for strangers to work and live with cooperation. Interpersonal interaction exists between and among diverse relationships in volunteering, such as new team member, experienced volunteer, organiser, local teacher, local school principal, students and their parents, and local community members.

Volunteering builds confidence with accomplishing a goal or task. There is a general consent on the improved level of confidence from the research respondents:

I can handle things more confidently now while it was hard for me to do new things in the past. I used to feel depressed by the complex world. But once you make the first step, everything else does not seem to be so intimidating.

(02-yxm-m)

Conflict during volunteering is relatively easy to deal with as a result of cooperation and common goal between the team members. The youth learns to negotiate methods and attitudes to address the conflict and prepare for the future. Since volunteer tourism activities aim to help and support the destination, there is seldom conflict between the community and team members.

Volunteering results in an enriched identity for the participants after the volunteer experience in Meixian. Volunteers transform their personality and world views with the personal and social growth they perform from activities and interactions during the volunteer trip. They achieve individual growth and socialisation from the impacts of personal awareness and learning, interpersonal awareness and learning, and ultimately self-contentment (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018).

When the colleague students become volunteers, their ordinary individual and social roles transfer into the extra-ordinary roles with a mission to contribute. They temporally break from the daily routine in college, and devour into a new interactive cycle that will last for a short period of time, normally 2 to 4 weeks. They undertake the new role and encounter the two-way or one-way interaction with the team members, local representatives at the destinations, and the volunteer organisers by means of cooperation, adaption, imitation and conflict (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018).

3. Volunteer and destinations

There appears to be an increasing gap between the economically advanced areas and the remote villages in China (Wen, Lin and Peng, 2018). Students in Guangzhou may not know what the reality is in poor Meixin area. Volunteering provides the opportunity for the blessed Chinese youth to better understand the disparity of China and appreciate their own life. Since the volunteers have had good education, the individual capacity and social capital the volunteer brings has helped to reform the outlook of people in the remote Meixian villages. Comments below confirm the mutual benefit of volunteering:

I think volunteering promotes communication between two worlds. On the one hand, volunteers bring an outside world to Meixian. On the other hand, we see a world that we never knew before. This trip teaches me the different way of living

and I have been so lucky.

(10-xq-f)

I have a deeper understanding of the remote villages in China because of this trip. This is mind blowing and my world view in life is different now.

(06-qq-f)

School principals and teachers in Meixian feel a breath of fresh air when working with volunteers. Although the volunteers are college students, they bring new technology and teaching methods to the rural villages. The youth are sincerely appreciated in their effort of contributing their resources and skills to support the destinations.

Local students are intrigued by the volunteers, who become idols for the local children. Parents in Meixian are impressed by the dedication of volunteers, and some parents have started to allocate more family time and money to support the education of their children. Volunteers not only introduce the exciting world outside to Meixian, but also remind the local about the cultural and heritage value of the traditional Chinese village life. Local villagers, many of whom know only the local dialect, enjoy learning mandarin with volunteers, and often invite the volunteers to their homes. There is a supportive rapport between the locals and volunteers, and they stay in touch after volunteers return.

However, since volunteers establish a temporary relationship during the trip, and have to leave, it may be questionable whether volunteers may just provide the initial motivation for the locals to change, and whether sustainable assistance will be available in Meixin. Volunteers may be inspiring in bringing the excitement and encouraging some local people to leave Meixian, but they may also depress some locals when some poor peasants have no option to leave. It bothers the volunteers that teaching for a short period of time in Meixian would not really change the whole situation. It becomes important to create more opportunity in Meixian so the locals can build a good future in Meixian instead of having to migrate to other areas. Volunteers are concerned about the long term impacts:

I am worried that that some seniors are disabled with very little belongings. How can they live after we leave? The temporary help from us is not sustainable. We should start a charity and donate some money to the local non-profit organization. The seniors need continuous support after we finish the trip.

(10-xq-f)

Since many parents are often migrant workers, who work in a different place away from home, sometime thousands of kilometres away, children have to live with their grandparents in Meixian. Grandparents often struggle with farming, daily chores and poor Mandarin proficiency, they find it difficult to provide much support for the grandchildren. Volunteers often need to pick up the students to go to school together in the morning, and accompany them back after school. Communication with the family members can be limited. Children who do not have parents at home may have to help with the grandparents with a reduction of study hours, leading to some issues:

One of the problems I identified is that many students in Meixian did not have a

strong desire for study. I was disappointed because I wanted a student to do more study but she just wanted me to play with her instead. I sometimes had doubt on my purpose of going to Meixian because I did not do as much as I planned. But upon reflection I understand that the main purpose for volunteering is to help the local kids know more about the outside world, instead of pushing them to do more study. They are poor children whose parents are migrant workers. These kids are left at home without the caring of parents from a very young age. They are in desperate need of company and friends. If I could perform a role that they need the most, that is what I should do and I should be proud.

(06-qq-f)

I only provided nine classes during my two weeks stay in Meixian. The stay was just too short and the assistance in teaching was limited. I really wanted to teach some English conversation by using role plays and cartoons, to apply English with the daily life. But students were not keen on English study because they did not think English would be useful for them.

(04-jhh-f)

The research attempts to ask the participants to evaluate how much they contributed to Meixian, and their level of achievement and satisfaction after the volunteering mission. Overall, the level of self-contentment appears to be low when the respondents reflected on their volunteering experience, and they did not feel they helped the destination very much. This result is in stark contrast with the high evaluation of the locals on the volunteers' contribution to Meixia. Apparently the influence of Chinese traditional culture is still present upon the respondents. It is common in Chinese culture to tend to reward people who are modest and humble instead of being over confident and flamboyant. There is a tendency for the respondents to focus on looking for ways to do a better job even though they already did well in the volunteering. They felt it would be a good manner to under estimate their own contribution to avoid boasting. This type deviation between the feedback of the participants and the locals makes it necessary for the researchers to accommodate cultural impacts by asking questions more carefully in the interviews, and improve the design of the research method to include the feedback of the locals.

Conclusion

Volunteering experience contributes to the personal development of the volunteers despite their diversified values, outlook and world views. Volunteers can cooperate well in different forms based on the consistent pursuit of self-development and dedication to others. Volunteering has proven to offer the youth life changing travelling experience while achieving personal growth and socialisation. It provides the opportunity for youth development, poverty alleviation and rural education. The youth will eventually return to their daily social roles but with changes in personal awareness and learning, interpersonal awareness and learning, and confidence. They complete the whole process of volunteering, accompanied by personal growth and socialisation.

Volunteering may help the youth to build the capacity to deal with the reality and their future. The youth may continue to volunteer in the future, or even take part in other roles, such as going back to live and work at the destination over a longer period of time, or becoming the volunteer organiser. Many volunteers attempt to link with places

even after they have settled in their professional career to make further contribution. Volunteering provides the potential that lead to profound changes in youth development. The volunteers have the opportunity to formulate their perception on the education situation and living environment of the disadvantaged region, and have a new understanding and thinking about volunteer activity and tourism.

There is an urgent need for the cooperation of volunteering organization and government agencies to develop long term strategy to provide sustained assistance to remote areas. Youth volunteers provide short term assistance for disadvantaged areas although the destination needs coordinated approach for constant and reliable sources of support.

Adhering with the purpose of transferring culture and social capital to help disadvantaged community, Meixian Team makes valuable contribution to the destination. It is a relatively new volunteer organisation that is still evolving and changing. There is potential for its management to improve in program design in relation to the length and activities. The management of volunteer organization is closely linked with the level of satisfaction of the destination, and the self-contentment level of volunteers. Sufficient training and regulation are necessary to guarantee the sustainable growth of this sector.

It is important for the researcher to participate in the volunteering trip to better understand the nature of the experience. In the previous research projects on volunteering the author did not have the chance to join the team to experience the volunteering process. That absence has clearly limited the imagination and insights of the researcher although it may help with the objectivity of the research. If the researchers participate in the practice with the respondents and actually undertake the whole process, they may collect some data on the site at the destination, with a certainly enhanced understanding of volunteering, and in depth connection with the insights of volunteers, compared with the case when the researchers are absent.

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