

Benefits from NGO - School library Cooperation: the China Experience

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Good afternoon. It is a pleasure and certainly an extreme honor for me to be with you today. I am speaking to you not as a librarian, but as one who has benefitted a great deal from the efforts of librarians, especially the school librarians. Our working with and supporting NGOs is our way of showing our appreciation and in acknowledging the importance of school libraries and the contributions of school librarians.

Certainly that NGOs and libraries have had a long and illustrious record of cooperation in the US starting in the 1880s is well known, with Andrew Carnegie funding public and university libraries. However, the focus of nonprofits in China today is with school libraries. Now, why is this? The government has provided significant support to the university libraries as well as public libraries in large urban cities. Resources are put into these libraries as a source of national pride. However, libraries in rural areas are neglected. Although, each county has a public library, the loneliest place in a rural community is that public library. Although nearly all schools have a school library, and indeed the government has standards that decreed each school should have so many books per elementary student, so many per high school student, etc. This standard is rarely realized in the rural communities. When time comes to provide reports.

The school administrator would gather magazines, computer manual are used to beef up the numbers. Furthermore, nearly all school libraries - whether in urban or rural areas are usually under lock and key. They are for show when visitors come, not for use. I recently visited an elementary school in Beijing of about 200 students. Yet, the library boast of a collection of over 25,000 volumes. Upon closer examination, not one book was borrowed during the past year. So, there is much work to be done and as the Chinese value education above all else, much of the NGO's efforts both within China and amongst overseas Chinese is to support schools and school libraries.

NGO's work with rural school libraries in China has been mostly book based. In the rural communities, the library is of the lowest priority at the school, with the weakest teacher assigned as the librarian. In an environment where testing is all important, memorizing what are in text books becomes all consuming. There would be no time in the students' life for outside reading. If you think that there is too much emphasis on testing in the US, it is nothing in comparison to what is the case in China. The majority of nonprofits have concentrating on providing books and encouraging reading programs.

Here are some examples:

ESS's Adopt a rural school library program. This foundation based in Washington DC has a book program that provides about \$500 worth of books to elementary school libraries. They are one of the oldest foundations - working for about 20 years. Thus far, they have provided books to over 4000 elementary school libraries. They also have book report competitions and a scholarship program. ESS is certainly the leader in terms of sheer volume.

The Cherished Dream Foundation is locally based in Shanghai and they provide a welcoming environment for elementary school libraries with specially designed book shelves, and include reading activities. Perhaps the most hands on and innovative program. As this organization is only 2 years old, it would be interesting to see how this program will evolve in the future.

The Dream Corp. This is a student organization out of Duke University in North Carolina. The students utilize their summer vacations to go to rural schools to deliver donated books and engage in providing reading programs for children operating from school libraries. Started overseas, this organization has inspired local university students to emulate their program and many are now spending their summer months at rural school libraries.

These organizations have certainly helped to revitalize the school libraries in rural areas, providing not only the most recently published books, but activities that encourage usage.

Although many organizations have been providing computers to rural schools, Evergreen Education Foundation has pioneered combining the use of computers, the Internet, books and student work scholarships to provide programs not only for the school library that benefit not only students but entire communities.

The majority of China's population is still rural and many of them have incomes of less than \$1 a day. The migration from rural communities of able bodied young men and women into the cities is significant and increasing. Our hope is that by helping this segment of the population gain access to information, technology workshops and library resources, we will help rural communities improve their quality of life and encourage the young people to stay and participate in the revitalization of their farming communities.

So, why does Evergreen work with school libraries? Why are school libraries so important? Two reasons: The first is that the school library is the easiest entry point for an outside NGO. The local authorities welcome NGO cooperation in anything that has to do in improving educational opportunities. The second is that the high schools are normally the highest educational institution in the community. To automate the school library we need educated teachers who are conversant with computers and technology and who can be trained in the rudiments of operating a library. We provide computers, library management software, books and work scholarships and training workshop.

By working through the school libraries, we are able to mount programs that benefit the entire community. We operate in 2 ways. We invite the public in by offering family library cards and family nights when the library is open to the public.

Then we go out into the community: For example, in Qinghai, a western province which is next to Tibet, our school librarian, armed with a laptop, visits individual farmers to teach them about the use of fertilizers and insecticides.

In Shaanxi, we have a one room libraries in individual farms, operated by an old farmers, who also dispense farming advice to those visiting the library. These one room libraries are managed by the school library nearby.

In Gansu, an agricultural cooperative also boast of a one room library, with books on loan from the nearby school library. Our librarian took the mushrooms grown from this cooperative (now these mushrooms are grown for the high end market) and armed with a cook book from the library, they would go visit individual farmers. Use a recipe found in the cookbook, prepare a dish to share with the farmers. While eating the dish, they would inform the farmers that they can also grow this mushroom and there are books at the cooperative that can tell them how to do it. The first farmer who took this up increased his income in the following year to 30,000 RMB.

After receiving books on soil analysis at the library, our chemistry teacher took students into the field to gather soil samples. These are taken to the chemistry labs and students perform analysis. Then, they return to the farms to educate the farmers on what fertilizer to use for what kind of crops.

A similar project involves renewable energy using pig manure to generate biogas for cooking and lighting. User handbooks are developed using the reading materials found at the library.

I would like to end my talk with a story that I am the most proud of. As senior high school education is not free, we provide each of the schools, whose library we support with work scholarships. These students recipients are required to work in the library at least 2 hours per week. I am happy to tell you that nearly all of these students who have graduated are going to universities, some of them to the top universities in China. Recently, we have heard from some of the students who have graduated from universities. They fully appreciated our cooperation with their school libraries and now want to become volunteers to work for Evergreen. In the final analysis, I think this is the best indicator that school libraries are making differences in people's lives. There cannot be a better target for our cooperation.