



COMMENT ON “THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PEACE CORPS IN BIG CITIES OF CHINA: AN EXCEPTION TO AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC PHILOSOPHY?”


Hui Tang

Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, 200040 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3671-4500> |  chunfeng6786@sina.com

Commented article reference: YE, L.; LIAO, Z. The activities of the peace corps in big cities of China: an exception to American diplomatic philosophy? **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, v. 47, n. 3, e0240030, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14518>.

Received: 10/08/2023 | Approved: 15/08/2023 | Published: 27/02/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n3.e0240099>



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License.

COMMENT ON “THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PEACE CORPS IN BIG CITIES OF CHINA: AN EXCEPTION TO AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC PHILOSOPHY?”

*Hui Tang*¹

Commented article reference: YE, L.; LIAO, Z. The activities of the peace corps in big cities of China: an exception to American diplomatic philosophy? **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp Journal of Philosophy, v. 47, n. 3, e0240030, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14518>.

According to Ye and Liao (2024), The Peace Corps, once seen as an exceptional manifestation of pragmatic American diplomacy, operated in China for nearly 30 years in a relatively low-profile manner. Peace Corps volunteers, through their own process of cultural adaptation, have made significant contributions to people-to-people exchanges between China and the United States. The establishment of the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program was a result of improved bilateral relations and aimed to further promote this relationship. However, when the development of the project came into conflict with U.S. foreign policy towards China, Peace Corps had to discontinue its operations in China, contradicting its claimed political neutrality.

Throughout the history of the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program, most volunteers were placed in universities in major cities, creating a unique cultural adaptation environment. They faced significant cultural differences, but experienced lower acculturative stress in their material lives. Through active support for cultural learning, Peace Corps facilitated cultural exchanges between China and the United States for the majority of volunteers. By examining the development history of the Peace Corps project in China, it becomes evident that there is no fundamental distinction between Peace Corps activities in

¹ Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, 200040 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3671-4500>. E-mail: chunfeng6786@sina.com.

China and those in other countries. Peace Corps does not deviate from the United States' pragmatic diplomatic philosophy.

1 PARALLEL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINA-U.S. BILATERAL RELATIONS

The article discusses the establishment and development of the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program, which was a part of the Peace Corps operations in China. Initially, the Peace Corps considered entering China due to the country's need for mid-level human resources assistance and the potential for cultural exchange. However, the program was influenced by the political dynamics of China-U.S. relations.

During the early years of the Peace Corps, China and the United States had strained relations, characterized by political isolation and hostility. The Peace Corps was viewed with suspicion in China and was even considered a spy agency. It was not until the improvement of China-U.S. relations in the 1970s and the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1979 that the Peace Corps began its gradual entry into China (Cao, 2019, p. 9).

The negotiations between China and the United States, regarding the program details, were complex and took several years. The focus of the program initially centered on English education, as China recognized the importance of English as a communication tool for economic development. The Peace Corps aimed to assist in this area by providing English teachers and helping to meet the demand for qualified English educators in China. However, there were challenges and sticking points in the negotiations. China opposed using the name “Peace Corps” due to negative perceptions and believed it would create public opinion obstacles. As a result, the program in China was officially named “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers.” The areas of operation of the program were carefully negotiated, with a focus on sending volunteers to underserved areas rather than big cities. Sichuan Province was chosen as the first region to receive Peace Corps volunteers, and the Peace Corps office was established on the campus of Sichuan University, in Chengdu.

The development of the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program progressed relatively smoothly from 1993 to 2016, with an increase in both funding and the number of volunteers (Dai; Hu, 2009). China played an active role in managing the program, with coordination from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and centralized management by the Ministry of Education. Overall, the article highlights the challenges and progress of the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program within the context of China-U.S. relations and the mission of cultural exchange and assistance of the Peace Corps.

2 VOLUNTEERS’ ACCULTURATIVE STRESS IN CHINA AND CULTURAL LEARNING SUPPORT OF PEACE CORPS

The “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program, facilitated by the Peace Corps, provides a platform for American volunteers to engage in cross-cultural experiences in China. While these experiences can be enriching and transformative, volunteers may also encounter acculturative stress – the psychological and emotional challenges arising from adapting to a new culture. To effectively address acculturative stress, the Peace Corps plays a crucial role in providing cultural learning support. This paper discusses the acculturative stress experienced by volunteers in China and explores the cultural learning support mechanisms implemented by the Peace Corps to enhance volunteers’ well-being and cultural adaptation.

The article discusses the acculturative stress faced by Peace Corps volunteers in China and the cultural learning support provided to them. The volunteers experience stress in adapting to Chinese culture due to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures. However, Peace Corps offers cultural learning support to help volunteers overcome these challenges and integrate into the local social culture. The social and economic development level, in the areas where volunteers serve in China, does not impose significant pressure on their acculturation. Instead, the main source of stress comes from the cultural differences they encounter. Although the material conditions and living convenience are relatively good for the volunteers, the cultural adaptation poses a greater challenge.

The Peace Corps volunteers in China are mainly assigned to teach English at universities in Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou and Gansu. These universities are typically located in central cities or provincial capitals, where the development level is generally better than in other areas. The living conditions provided by the universities, such as on-campus apartments, are generally consistent with other foreign teachers’ ones. While the living allowance for volunteers was comfortable in the early days, it has become tighter over time due to the increasing price level in China. Cultural differences between American and Chinese cultures create more pressure for volunteers. Chinese culture is characterized as a high-context one with collectivist values and a long-term orientation, while American culture is a low-context one with individualistic values and a short-term orientation. The social, economic, legal and educational system differences between China and the United States, as well as language disparities, further contribute to the cultural stress experienced by volunteers.

The “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program aims to facilitate cultural exchange, and cultural learning is a crucial aspect of the objectives of the program (Liu, 2016, p. 79). Volunteers are expected to teach English, but their role goes beyond classroom instruction. They are encouraged to organize various cultural activities, such as English clubs, drama and speech clubs, and sports clubs, to foster communication and promote cultural understanding. Peace Corps provides language and culture training to volunteers as part of

their pre-service training. The training emphasizes the use of local resources and community-based learning methods. Volunteers are divided into learning groups, and teachers focus on oral English and essential expressions based on different situations. Additionally, Peace Corps encourages volunteers to participate in language classes and hire Chinese tutors to further develop their language skills.

In terms of teaching skills, volunteers receive training in English language teaching (TEFL) to better adapt to the English teaching environment in China. Teaching practice is a significant component of their skill training, where they gain experience by teaching English to local students in model schools. Health and safety knowledge training is also provided to ensure the volunteers' well-being. Overall, Peace Corps provides cultural learning support to help volunteers in the "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers" program adapt to Chinese culture and fulfill the objectives of cultural exchange and English education of the program.

The "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers" program offers volunteers the opportunity to engage in transformative cross-cultural experiences in China. However, the process of acculturation may also lead to acculturative stress, necessitating appropriate support mechanisms. The Peace Corps plays a crucial role in mitigating acculturative stress by providing pre-departure cultural preparation, in-country support, coping strategies and fostering mutual cultural learning. Through effective cultural learning support, the Peace Corps enhances the volunteers' well-being and facilitates meaningful cultural exchange, promoting friendship and understanding between the United States and China.

3 CULTURAL LEARNING SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTEERS IN THE "U.S.-CHINA FRIENDSHIP VOLUNTEERS" PROGRAM

The "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers" program aims to foster mutual understanding and cultural exchange between the United States and China. It provides a unique opportunity for volunteers from both countries to immerse themselves in each other's cultures while contributing to various community development projects. However, successful cross-cultural interaction requires more than just good intentions; it demands a solid foundation of cultural learning and support for the volunteers. This paper discusses the importance of cultural learning support for volunteers participating in the "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers" program and explores effective strategies to enhance their cross-cultural experiences.

Avoiding Cultural Misunderstandings: cross-cultural encounters often lead to misunderstandings due to differences in language, customs and traditions. Cultural learning helps volunteers recognize and navigate these differences, fostering meaningful connections with the local communities they serve.

Promoting Cultural Sensitivity: culturally sensitive volunteers can respect and appreciate diverse perspectives, leading to more effective collaboration and reducing the risk of inadvertently causing offense.

Enhancing Program Outcomes: Volunteers equipped with cultural knowledge are better positioned to engage with local beneficiaries, adapt to new environments and contribute positively to the goals of the program.

Language Training: basic language skills are vital for effective communication. Providing language classes, the specific ones to the region where volunteers will be stationed, can boost their confidence and ability to connect with locals.

Cross-Cultural Workshops: pre-departure workshops can introduce volunteers to the host country’s history, traditions and social norms, preparing them for the cultural transition.

Intercultural Communication Skills: training in intercultural communication helps volunteers develop active listening and empathy, enabling them to bridge cultural gaps.

Cultural Mentors: assigning local mentors to volunteers can offer invaluable insights into the host culture, customs and behaviors, fostering a deeper understanding.

Participatory Learning: encouraging volunteers to engage in local customs and activities enables them to experience firsthand the culture they are there to learn about.

Reflection and Debriefing: regular reflection sessions, with program coordinators and fellow volunteers, allow for processing experiences and addressing any cultural challenges.

Training on Conflict Management: volunteers should receive guidance on handling cultural conflicts professionally and constructively, promoting harmonious interactions.

Encouraging Open Dialogue: creating a safe space for volunteers to share concerns and seek advice will help address issues before they escalate.

Knowledge Sharing: encouraging returning volunteers to share their experiences and cultural insights, with future participants, perpetuates a culture of continuous learning.

Alumni Support: establishing an alumni network can provide ongoing support for volunteers and facilitate knowledge exchange among program participants.

The “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program offers a remarkable platform for cultural exchange, but its success hinges on the cultural learning support provided to volunteers. Pre-departure orientation, in-country immersion, cross-cultural conflict resolution and long-term support are essential components of a robust cultural learning framework. By equipping volunteers with the necessary cultural knowledge and skills, the program can foster mutual respect, understanding and lasting friendships between the United States and China,

ultimately achieving its broader objectives of cross-cultural cooperation and community development.

4 VOLUNTEERS' ACCULTURATIVE EFFECT IN CHINA

The Peace Corps volunteers' integration in China, who primarily live in large cities, can be more challenging compared to volunteers in rural areas and small towns. However, their integration is not limited to their immediate communities due to convenient transportation options, allowing them to expand their activities and experience the social culture throughout the entire city and even across China. This broader contact with Chinese social culture enables Peace Corps volunteers in China to achieve the goal of promoting mutual understanding and demonstrates distinct characteristics in their acculturation strategies. Unlike volunteers in rural areas, who heavily rely on local residents for daily support, the volunteers in the "U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers" program, living in urban areas, have fewer urgent needs to interact with local people outside of their work. They generally live in high-rise apartment buildings and have limited social interactions with neighbors. Their role, as college English teachers, also means that they have less immediate necessity to communicate with local people, as their students already have a good foundation in English, and their colleagues often speak English as well. Consequently, Peace Corps volunteers in China have fewer daily interactions with local people compared to volunteers in other host countries.

However, this does not imply that volunteers in China are less willing to integrate or make less effort in doing so. Instead, they actively create opportunities for interaction despite the less immediate need. They strive to construct situations for mutual understanding and communication with local people, going beyond their basic living and work requirements. While community integration may present difficulties, most volunteers in China still actively engage with local people and make efforts to promote mutual understanding. The unique service environment in China, particularly in urban areas, provides Peace Corps volunteers with a broader range of cultural adaptation opportunities. Although the urban life's closed nature can make community integration more challenging, the well-developed transportation network allows volunteers to explore their own cities as well as travel throughout China. They use their spare time to visit various places of interest, both in their own cities and in rural areas surrounding them, to gain a deeper understanding of local culture and customs. During holidays, many volunteers utilize their saved allowances or personal expenses to travel to different cities and regions, experiencing the social culture of diverse areas in China. The combination of living in urban areas and the extensive exploration of China allows Peace Corps volunteers in China to have a more comprehensive understanding of both their local communities and Chinese society as a whole. While their immediate community interactions may be limited, they compensate by expanding their interactions to encompass the city they

live in and the entire country. This broader scope of interaction contributes to a more holistic perspective and a deeper appreciation of Chinese social culture.

Language Acquisition: volunteers may experience challenges and successes in acquiring the Chinese language, which greatly influences their ability to interact with locals and adapt to the host culture.

Social Customs and Traditions: understanding and embracing Chinese customs and traditions are crucial for volunteers to integrate into the community and build meaningful relationships.

Identity Formation: the acculturative process may lead volunteers to navigate changes in their self-identity, as they reconcile their American heritage with their exposure to Chinese culture.

Communication Barriers: volunteers might encounter communication barriers due to language differences, non-verbal cues and cultural norms, necessitating the development of effective intercultural communication skills.

Building Empathy and Understanding: engaging in intercultural interactions fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances, enhancing mutual respect and reducing cultural misunderstandings.

Value Reassessment: volunteers may reevaluate their own cultural values and assumptions as they encounter different value systems in China, leading to personal growth and open-mindedness.

Cultural Exchange and Influence: volunteers also have the potential to influence the host culture through their actions, attitudes and values, contributing to a two-way cultural exchange.

Initial Adjustment Challenges: volunteers may experience culture shock upon arrival in China, with feelings of disorientation and discomfort. Support systems and coping mechanisms are vital during this phase.

Adaptation Strategies: over time, volunteers may develop coping strategies to manage culture shock, fostering resilience and adaptability.

Cross-Cultural Learning for Locals: the presence of international volunteers can offer the local community insights into American culture, promoting cross-cultural learning and understanding.

Community Development: Volunteers, by contributing to community development projects, can leave a lasting positive impact on the host community, reinforcing the goals of the program.

The acculturative effect, experienced by volunteers in the “U.S.-China Friendship Volunteers” program, is a dynamic process that involves cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, value reassessment and coping with culture shock. The interaction between American volunteers and the Chinese host community creates opportunities for mutual learning, understanding and community development. It is essential to provide adequate support and training for volunteers to navigate this acculturative process successfully. By fostering positive cross-cultural experiences, the program can create lasting connections between the United States and China, promoting friendship, cooperation and cultural exchange.

CONCLUSION

The presence of the Peace Corps in China demonstrates that it aligns with the pragmatic philosophy of American diplomacy, suggesting that the organization functions as a tool of American diplomacy. The trajectory of the Peace Corps in China is closely intertwined with the development of China-U.S. relations, indicating a lack of complete political neutrality as claimed by the organization. While Peace Corps volunteers in China enjoy better material living conditions in urban areas, their challenges primarily stem from cultural differences rather than the rural conditions commonly associated with Peace Corps missions. Nonetheless, the Peace Corps provides comprehensive cultural learning support, during pre-service training, to facilitate the volunteers’ integration into the local social environment. It is important to note that these particularities may be linked to China’s unique status among Peace Corps host countries. During the Cold War, the Peace Corps was seen as a means for the United States to win over neutral forces in developing countries, with neutrality defined as a neutral stance towards Western forces led by the U.S. and socialist forces, represented by the Soviet Union and China. Following the Soviet Union’s collapse, China emerged as a significant player within one of the opposing forces. Thus, the entry of the Peace Corps into China meant entering a once-hostile force. However, it is crucial to recognize that the most politically specific a host country is, the most it challenges the claim of the Peace Corps of political neutrality.

REFERENCES

CAO, D. A Text Analysis of 70-year English Language Education Policy: From the Perspective of National Interests. **Journal of National Academy of Education Administration**, v. 12, p. 9-17, 2019.

DAI, W.; HU, W. **Research on the development of foreign language education in China (1949-2009)**. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2009.

LIU, F. The Strengthening of the US Competition with China and the Future Trend of China-US Relations. **China International Studies**, v. 1, p. 79-99, 2016.

YE, L.; LIAO, Z. The activities of the peace corps in big cities of China: an exception to American diplomatic philosophy? **Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp Journal of Philosophy**, v. 47, n. 3, e0240030, 2024. Available at: <https://revistas.marilia.unesp.br/index.php/transformacao/article/view/14518>.