



Poverty in China: a personal encounter – part two

By Huiyuan Liu
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In 2019, I worked in Liangshan, one of the poorest regions in China, as a primary school teacher for one semester. In my [first blog](#), I described the poverty I encountered there. In this one, I reflect on my experience as a volunteer teacher.

On the blackboard at the back of one classroom in my school, an earlier volunteer teacher had written in big bold characters, “I dream that you will get out of the mountains”. Underneath the words were many colourful stickers, each written on by a student. The majority simply stated “I want to become rich”; some said they wanted to become a teacher; a few mentioned other professions; none indicated any interest in farming or promoting Yi culture or religion.

Most local families in the area where I taught are related in one way or another. For generations, they have lived in their own unique ways isolated from the rest of China. Within the past few years, however, labour mobility has increased significantly. More and more young people try to get out. Many still come back every year during the Yi New Year, which is usually in November when the harvest is over. They bring with them stylish clothes, a large variety of snacks and candies, and fun adventurous stories. Many of them can hardly speak Mandarin (China’s main language) and most are illiterate. When I asked them if they lived comfortably in the big cities and were able to integrate into the local community well, they usually answered no. Still, in their opinion, the outside world was better simply because they could become richer.

In my school, most teachers were volunteers and Han – China’s main ethnic group. Only one teacher was Yi. He was from the local area, but he was more involved in administration than actual teaching. Some other local schools included Nuosu language and Yi culture in their curriculum, but not my one. We only taught Chinese (Mandarin – China’s official language, and also the language of all instruction at the school), maths, and a few subjects such as

history, music and painting.

The Yi people are highly respectful of teachers. After learning that we were teachers at the local schools, we were warmly invited to festivals, weddings and even religious activities, and served the best food possible. Many of us were interested in learning the local history, religion and culture. Unfortunately, this could only be done through observation and guesswork. The older generations were unable to communicate with us directly, while the younger generations could not explain well or did not even themselves understand the traditions of their culture.

Yi people who have worked beyond the mountains are particularly supportive of having their children and siblings receive education. Yet at the same time, their personal networks tempt those same children and siblings to drop out of school and go to work. Only one person from the village where I taught had been admitted to a university. Poor education quality, as well as short-term income earning opportunities, trap the Yi people in a life of poverty.

Reducing the dropout rate and ensuring that all children receive at least nine years of schooling has become a top priority in China's national education policy. Many social benefits and sponsorships are tied to students' enrolment. Indeed, a lot of students came to my school just because they could receive a free lunch – usually, a box of milk plus a little package of cookies or one sausage. But school itself seemed pointless to many of my students. The biggest barrier was the language. Some students could not learn anything in class due to their inability to understand what we were saying. In the current education system, forcing a student to repeat a year is not allowed. As a result, the higher the grade level, the more students fall behind. This makes teaching very difficult, as we were unable to divide students into groups based on their academic performance to better address their needs.

Too much dependence on volunteers can also result in poor outcomes. The teaching abilities of volunteers vary greatly. All that was needed to become a volunteer was a university or college degree. No prior teaching experience was required, and very limited training was provided. Moreover, volunteers are not held accountable for their teaching results. Setting stricter standards for volunteers is not really feasible as it will simply reduce the supply. But it does mean that teaching outcomes rely heavily on volunteers' personal sense of responsibility and ability to learn on the job. But then again, most volunteers, like myself, are only there for a semester. Frequent teacher turnover is another negative. Teachers typically leave just after the students have got used to them. There is little time to build trust and mutual understanding. Some volunteers rely heavily on threats and corporal punishment to keep students in line.

Liangshan, with strong support from government, is developing at an impressively high speed. But it is still far behind. Its current education system, highly dependent on Han volunteers, facilitates the process of integrating the traditional Yi people into the mainstream, but is also turning Liangshan into a low-skilled labour resource pool for big cities, undermining its local cultural and religious heritage. Better education is the solution, with more use of the local language, more attention to local culture, and less reliance on inexperienced volunteers. There are no easy solutions. As much as I enjoyed my time as a volunteer, one suggestion I would make to the Chinese government is to invest in qualified teachers and to pay them well so that they will teach at local schools like the ones in Liangshan, and stay for a lot longer than one semester.

This is the second blog in a two-part series. You can find the first blog [here](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/poverty-in-china-a-personal-encounter-part-two-20200911/>

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