

Let's Get Bready, To Give Back!



L-3: Can assess the social and personal value of civic engagement for achieving change.

1. Critically analyzes national or local civic issues from a systemic perspective.
2. Explains the impact an engaged citizen can make to improve the effectiveness of a society.
3. Articulates a strategy for personal civic engagement.
4. Engages in an activity that positively contributes to the civic life of a community.

Students demonstrate this competence by actively engaging with other community members in addressing an issue facing the community. The issue itself is analyzed to show an understanding of social and economic trends that shape the community. Given these systemic trends, the role of the individual in action with others is articulated with specific strategies for future involvement. Students develop and practice related skills by directly engaging in an activity that is of benefit to the civic life of a community. Activities can range from, but are not limited to, producing public art or participating in street theater, serving as the public advocate of a particular social group, getting involved in a justice campaign, contributing to public awareness of an environmental issue, or participating in political meetings or events that address a particular social issue. SNL will not accept transfer courses for this competence but students may document learning through an ILP.

In 2006, I arrived in China, a French student with little more than a backpack and an address for my dorm. I had traveled extensively previously to this and therefore did not feel any anxiety about being in a new country, just a deep curiosity for all the Chinese society had to offer. I went to school, learned Mandarin, and in a couple of years was working as a manager for a German logistical firm. I enjoyed an “Expatriate life”, in the fast paced and cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, but was often saddened by some of the living conditions of many Chinese people. I wanted to know more about the challenges that this up and coming economy faced. The culture and the people fascinated me. I wanted to understand the challenges and see what I, an engaged citizen could do for the society I had adopted as my own.

The Chinese economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 changed the face of China. Injecting capitalistic values into the Communist society created a huge amount of wealth for the country. In thirty years, China evolved from a country enduring famine where thirty million people died during the great leap forward initiated by Mao Zedong, to the World's Second-Biggest Economy in 2010 (Tomoko, 2010). “In 2013, China now has the second-largest number of Fortune Global 500 companies in the world (Lin and Curtis, P. 699, 2013).”

However, all Chinese people do not evenly share in this economic growth. Because of the well-known corruption within the government, companies and people who are “connected” to the government are among the first to benefit from this growth. According to Lin and Curtis, authors of *We Are The (National) Champions: Understanding The Mechanisms Of State Capitalism In China* “some commentators claim that “relationships” are the key to success of the Chinese economy, this is almost certainly an accurate observation, and scholars have made some headway in exposing these relationships (P. 705, 2013).”

I was confronted with this government corruption frequently due to my work in the freight forwarding business. The best way, and sometimes the only way, to get cargo cleared through Chinese customs, was to visit the government customs officers with a “present”. The unbalanced access to wealth is also defined by other factors. Wang Feng states “members of the society continue to be differentiated by social groups or categories they belong to: urban versus rural origin, migrants versus local residents, and employees in state or state-controlled institutions versus private entrepreneurs and self-employed street vendors. The collusion of political power and market opportunities, it can be said, has resulted in a level and a pattern of inequality rarely seen in Chinese history (Feng, P. 3, 2013).”

This situation creates a gap between the very wealthy and the rest of the population. We also have to consider that the wealth produced in China is based on their manufacturing industries. “Manufacturing accounts for some 30 percent of China's total economy against 10% in the USA today (Fallows, P. 56, 2012).” Brown and Xing, the authors of *Building Local Support For Chinese Civil Society With International Resources* ask this question “Is local support for civil society important to China? After all, China has a strong government that is widely recognized as an emerging superpower. Its decision to foster a market-oriented for-profit sector has led to extraordinary economic growth over recent decades, bringing literally hundreds of millions out of poverty more than any other country by a significant margin. What does an enhanced civil society offer to a country with a strong government and productive business sector (P. 713, 2012)?” Ultimately, if the Chinese economy wants to keep growing and keep generating large profits, it is in the interest of the government to keep wages low for the workers.

This economic gap was illustrated to me on a daily basis. I had come to Shanghai because of the great opportunities it offered for someone of my experience and background. Being a foreigner automatically

gave me a leg up because medium sized companies in China were fast comprehending that even though they had the work force, not all the companies had the social understanding that it took to be a key competitor in a global market yet. They were looking for people who could connect their goods with a global marketplace. I was one of those people and because of that; I was able to make a salary that allowed me to have a luxury apartment in the heart of downtown Shanghai. The cost of living was much lower than it was in France and I was even able to have a maid and driver.

The economic gap is one that exists in all Chinese cities, however it is more pronounced in Shanghai, the economic capital of China. I traveled extensively for my work, sourcing products for export to France, and everywhere I went, I was shocked by the living conditions of the everyday workers as compared to the modern buildings and luxury goods that were available in these cities. In Shanghai, it was more evident though for a couple of reasons. One, Shanghai is a coastal city and therefore a major port for much of the export that happens from China. Two, historically Shanghai has been an international city doing much of the banking and trading for the country. For these reasons, Shanghai has accumulated the most wealth, but also attracted the most migrant workers. These workers as well as many of the Shanghaies citizens make wages that do not allow them to participate in the new inflated Shanghai economy.

Living in this city was exciting because of the amazing energy that was all around. Everything seemed possible in Shanghai, but this was not without sacrifice on the part of the workers that were building this city. Tall high-rise buildings seemed to be growing up all around the city and hordes of people from the rural countryside came in to work on and build these projects. There were not enough places to house them, and they did not have the means to afford proper apartments so on many of these sites, the workers were living in makeshift housing. Many times this meant old shipping containers that were set up with metal bunk beds. Some of these containers were just down the street from where I lived and in the morning I would see the large doors of those containers creak open and men would emerge from those containers stretching and rubbing their eyes ready for their next day's work. Other men would be returning to the same containers ready for a well-deserved rest after their all night shift.

This leads to another factor widely disregarded by the Chinese government, the human rights conditions of the workers. The arrest of the Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, former professor and prominent activist for human rights speaks loudly about human rights problems in China (Hartnett, P.224, 2013). Everywhere I went the gap between the haves and have-nots was evident. Although I was benefiting from the fruits of this fast growing economy, I had to question myself and the system that I was supporting when faced with the poor living conditions of not just the migrant workers but also my own neighbors down the block. On almost every city block of Shanghai, on any normal day, one can see people doing their morning toilet outside of their homes on the street. Women washing clothes on the sidewalk as luxury cars barrel past. Babies being held over open gutters to use the toilet. These were people, who even though they lived on my street, could not afford a meal at the fast food restaurant they were living next to.

I had come to Shanghai because of the opportunities that were offered but also to learn about the culture, and it seemed that even though I was living among it I was living in a world apart. I wanted to learn more and started looking for volunteer opportunities that would connect me to some understanding of the culture. I began visiting orphanages in Shanghai. The living conditions in the orphanages were terrible. There were not enough adults to supervise the children. The buildings were in disrepair and they were living in unsanitary conditions. The dormitories had no heating systems and the orphans, boys and girls were mixed in the same room. They had no private space. Beyond that, what

really concerned me was the lack of opportunity for these children. Very few knew how to read and most of them were already working in factories for extremely low wages. “While the Western concept of charity valorizes giving to strangers, the Chinese framework idealizes giving to kin (Hsu, P. 84, 2008).” These children had no kin, and therefore had no one to look out for them. The government had given up on them and did the bare minimum to keep them alive. These visits were a revelation; it led to my engagement in what was going to become a non-profit organization for the benefit of Chinese orphans.

My first endeavor as an engaged citizen was to volunteer for the association “Hands On Shanghai”¹. My mission was to keep company with and entertain children who were in the hospital for extended periods of time. This took several forms, from playing simple games or singing songs to the kids, to giving them basic classes in French or English. It was a great and very humbling learning experience but I felt that the impact on the society was limited. Although I brought relief to the children for a few hours a week, I was not really improving their life or making any lasting change.

I kept thinking about other ways to affect change in the society and be part of an entity that would help people. I also wanted that change to be sustainable and make a real difference in the society. I was part of the French Junior Chamber International (JCEF)² and other members of the association were looking for volunteers to form a group to import a Vietnamese non-profit project concept called La Boulangerie Francaise³, to China. The project in Vietnam was to teach Vietnamese orphans to bake bread in a professional capacity so they could work for the many Vietnamese bakeries.

Baking, unlike factory work was a skill that had to be learned and thus made those particular orphans in demand. The kind of baking would be at the level of a French Boulanger, more in line with a chef than a local baker, providing them with the opportunities to work in five stars hotels, French restaurants, and high level Boulangeries/bakeries. The students would learn a trade that would be marketable in the booming Chinese bakery market. In China, French bread and patisserie are considered luxury goods, and since Chinese people do not have a culture of bread making there were very few qualified people to do this job. The orphans would go through training that would put them in high demand. They would become skilled craftsman.

This project inspired me for many reasons. I kept thinking about the Chinese orphans I had visited and their lack of hope for the future. Once the orphans are put in the orphanage system, they are mostly forgotten by the rest of society. Their only hope is that they find work in a factory, and this is not much of a future in China. They were truly on the fringe of society. My hope was that this project would be a way to help them access some of the resources that were out of reach for them. All of the orphans were already working in factories and had limited access to schooling that would qualify them for a career. Learning about Boulangerie would allow the orphans to step out of poverty and begin to close the economic gap for them in their society. It was also a real, sustainable solution to their problem, and I thought it might also be a way to start closing that gap in the society as a whole.

¹ www.handsonshanghai.org

² www.jcef-shanghai.com

³ www.laboulangeriefrancaise.org

Because this organization was already a success in Vietnam, I felt reassured that the project could be successful in China. "Social actors tend to trust and support new organizations, which seem similar to or



associated with familiar organizations, which they already trust (Baum and Oliver, P. 556, 1992)."

I became one of the twelve founding members of this organization in China. Although we were inspired by the work that was done in Vietnam, we had to make this charity our own in that, Chinese culture varies greatly from Vietnamese culture. This experience happened to be more challenging than any of us foresaw. I think that Brown and Hu, the authors of *Institutional embeddedness and the dynamics of organizational population*, give a great descriptions of foreign volunteers in China: "CSOs are often started by "dedicated amateurs" who

are inspired to tackle social problems but who have little training for the complex problems that often emerge with success (P. 715, 2012)."

Our strategy was to study the project developed in Vietnam and find a way to translate it in consideration with Chinese culture. Because the project in Vietnam was successful, we would be able to get some insights from the founders; JCEF members initiated the project in Vietnam, to launch our project. Organizational entrepreneurs tend to modify existing organizational forms, rather than create something radically different (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991).

We all agreed that teaching the orphans to bake at a professional level and linking them up with companies that needed this skill would be a beneficial solution to their problem. "Give an orphan some bread, you feed him for a day. Teach an orphan how to make bread, you make him a baker for life!" became the motto of our project.

We started to meet once every two weeks as a team to draw up the outlines of the project. Our first step was to define the strategies and resources we would use for our project. The second part of our strategy was to identify sponsors. Our project required all kinds of sponsors such as financial sponsors that would support us in obtaining what were needed for the training. We needed to identify companies that would be willing to employ the orphans as interns, and a school that would provide a space for the students to learn how to bake. The school had to be equipped with cooking gear and with a dormitory to welcome the children. We were also looking for a French school that would allow us to translate their Boulangerie program for our students in to a baking program in Chinese and a potential teacher to teach the classes.

Another thing that needed to be done was to contact orphanages that would help us identify our future students.

Lastly, we needed to confer with local Chinese institution that would help us to obtain the authorization for the orphans to live in the school dormitory, issue their work permits, and provide them with Shanghai work visas.

We then had to coordinate within our team and divide the workload. We had to decide, what we should start with, and what the final goal would be.

Finally, we thought about the long-term plan of action. We were twelve foreign volunteers living in China for a few years. We wanted to make sure that the project would be self-sustaining once we were gone, and allow more orphans to take advantage of it. We planned to pass the association over to a Chinese civil society organization. “International resources should be invested to catalyze sustainable changes in civil society rather than to create long-term external participation in civil society development. If civil society development must be rooted in local interests, concerns, and meanings, ongoing dependence on external resources can distract attention from grounding CSOs in local values and priorities (Brown and Xing, P. 730, 2012).”

Once our strategy was established, it was time to truly engage ourselves in our project. We wrote down a to-do list with all the points we needed to work on to start the project. The first point was to find our association a powerful name: Shanghai Young bakers (SYB) was born!

To Do List

- Identify potential sponsors and internship partners.
- Identify and contact orphanages.
- Identify and contact legal partners.
- Register Shanghai Young Bakers as an association with the government.
- Establish a rough budget per orphan for the six months of training (dormitory, food, gear, bus passes...).
- Contact the potential sponsors and internship partners and present our project.
- Depending on the money and internship promises, identify how many orphans we could include.
- Contact and identify the orphans that would benefit the most from the program.
- Start to work on work permits (Hukou⁴), contracts and liability insurance for the students.
- Contact a French school that could provide a French boulangerie chef to teach the children, and a syllabus.
- Find volunteers that can translate the program in to Chinese.
- Find a cooking school in Shanghai that would provide a classroom for our students.
- Work on the class/work schedule.
- Take care of the logistics (buy the equipment; install the dormitory, transportation cards...)
- Create a website for SYB and send newsletters to our partners.
- Create a buzz around the association to interest potential new sponsors.
- Start the program and follow up with the sponsors and 16 students.
- Prepare for a second batch of bakers.
- Identify and contact a CSO that would keep the project alive.

⁴“In order to avoid migration flux within China, the Chinese government delivers working permit (Hukou) for non-regional workers. These permits can be hard to obtain depending on your background. The Hukou in the Chinese context is an official identity of residency rights in a given geographic unit. Cities use the Hukou policy to impede the urban Hukou of migrants who are deemed unworthy in terms of socioeconomic attributes” (Li and Tao, 2012).

When the list was completed, we felt overwhelmed by the amount of work we had ahead of us. We were all working or studying full time and none of us had experience with running a non-profit organization. The key to our success was a very solid team and the network that all of us had developed during our few years in China.

We also wanted to draw social media attention to our project in order to bring SYB legitimacy. It was also great way to present our association to new sponsors for the second round of training... Our first step for media coverage was to create a representative website. One of the volunteers was a web-designer and created the association's website⁵ free of charge. Other volunteers were in charge of writing and sending a short newsletter to our sponsors on a monthly basis. This was the association's way to keep the sponsors connected to our project and let them know about our progress. Before the



classes began, we held a fundraiser for the project in hopes of not only raising additional funds but also bringing awareness to our cause. We reached out to a French Photographer who was working in Shanghai. He was inspired by our work and by the children themselves and offered to do a presentation of photographs he had done of the children. This was set up in a gallery space, and the photographer graciously displayed his pictures during a cocktail party. We invited all the actors of the association to meet and gather around the project. We invited

journalists along with members from the local government. During the event, a journalist proposed a short spot about the SYB project on national TV⁶⁷. This coverage was a showcase for the association. Because it was a spot shown on national television in China it also highlighted the change that can be accomplished by a few people who want to help and make a difference. Thus, our message was carried to a much greater audience.

This media attention also attracted many Chinese University students, who then wanted to help. They came to the organization with new ideas and obviously a much stronger understanding of the Chinese culture and ways to spread the message. They were passionate, and although they had wanted to do something to change the society they lived in, they did not know how. This project gave them a path and they in turn helped the organization grow.

The impact of this project went further than we could have imagined. For our first round of training, we received donations for a total of eighty thousand euros from three main partners, Carrefour, Paul and Accor hotel; this allowed us to enroll sixteen young bakers from three orphanages, Chiheng Foundation⁸, Les Enfants Du Madaifu⁹, and Aid for Street Kids¹⁰.

⁵ www.shanghaiyoungbakers.com

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYQUYn0jHiE>,

⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTCSayK9I_k

⁸ www.chihengfoundation.com

⁹ www.madaifu.info

¹⁰ www.xinxingaid.org.cn

Many of these children were not children from Shanghai and it was very complicated to get them the necessary paperwork and government authorization, the Hukou¹¹, for them to even come to Shanghai. This was because so many people wanted to come to Shanghai because of the job opportunities in this booming city, that it was almost impossible for a lone orphan with no connections to get the necessary paperwork.



One added challenge was the Chiheng foundation was an orphanage that

housed children who had lost their parents to AIDS. AIDS is still a very controversial topic in China and in many ways, AIDS is considered as a rural disease. There is very little AIDS awareness in large cities, and the government certainly does not promote it in Shanghai. In her article, *Distancing Disease in the Unblack Han Chinese Politic: Othering Difference in China's HIV/AIDS Media*, Hood states "during my fieldwork in Beijing, Shanghai, and Xiamen between 2002 and 2008, almost all of the Chinese city-dwellers and university students with whom I discussed HIV/AIDS saw it as a problem of other people. They often indicated they felt "distanced" from HIV, all too frequently making statements such as "AIDS is really far from me" (p. 282, 2013)." We were not sure we wanted to broach these challenges and had to make a decision as a group whether or not we would extend the opportunity to them. We ultimately decided to work with this orphanage and thankfully we did, because they were the ones who ultimately took over the running of the association when we had completed the training with the first round of children.

Since 2008, 100 orphans have had the opportunity to be a part of the SYB training. We have received very positive feedback from our sponsors that they were happy to be associated with the project and they have benefitted from the qualified work source the project provided them. Finally, we were able to pass on the association to the Chiheng Foundation, one of the Chinese orphanages that helped us identify some of the orphans. Because of their network in the government and their local Shanghai roots, they were able to take the association to another level and make it self-sustainable. "Chinese networks and support organizations can adapt international information, capacity building, and other resources to insure that they are congruent with Chinese expectations." (Brown and Xing, P. 730, 2012)

Something that I did not forecast but had the greatest impact on the society was that once educated, some orphans were eager to give the chance they had had to others. They were in fact, wanting to pay back the opportunity that was given to them by spreading that learning to other orphans like themselves. They had not only been granted a new start in life, but were spreading a message of love and compassion by helping others like themselves. This was truly the greatest benefit of all because it is in this way that the society begins to change as a whole. Not only do the children who become bakers

¹¹"In order to avoid migration flux within China, the Chinese government delivers working permit (Hukou) for non-regional workers. These permits can be hard to obtain depending on your background. The Hukou in the Chinese context is an official identity of residency rights in a given geographic unit. Cities use the Hukou policy to impede the urban Hukou of migrants who are deemed unworthy in terms of socioeconomic attributes" (Li and Tao, 2012).

become more economically wealthy, they also enrich the societal mores with compassion and love for others. Three of the orphans became teachers for the association and to this day work hard to train other orphans in the art of Boulangerie.

Before coming to China, I had traveled a lot. I spent time in India and Africa and was always concerned with the living conditions of people that I came across in those countries. Many times, I engaged in charity works, but always felt that I could not help in a significant way. I was not inside those societies so could not even begin to understand the complexities of the challenges they were facing. It was frustrating and overwhelming and I began to question if real change was even possible. When I came to China, I was faced with these same questions. I became involved with organizations that I felt were not doing much to make any real change. Because I was staying in China for an extended period, I was able to get deeper into the culture, learning about the challenges that the society was facing. In this way, I was able to connect with people and make an engaged effort to do something that would leave a lasting change. Through collection of data and critical analysis I was able to pinpoint a problem in the society, and through a long process of trial and error, I was able to connect with a group of individuals who could work together to solve a problem. That problem was to being to close the gap in the Chinese economic society and to relieve some of the challenges that were faced by those in the lower economic demographic of China (economic impact related to the larger economy in Shanghai). This was as two-pronged process. By teaching the orphans a new skill that allowed them to have a better career, we were actually able to help some people to close the economic gap.

Some of these students in turn went on to train more children, and therefore, the benefits kept multiplying themselves. The other part of this process that had a far greater impact was on the Chinese idea of charity and giving. In China, it is common for charity to be given within a family or to those that are “connected” to you. There is not much of a sense of community in the way of helping each other for the greater good. This spirit of compassion and giving was embodied by the children who wanted to give back as well as passed on by our media coverage of the foundation.

We were also able to reach some University students who had felt that they wanted to make a difference in their society but did not know how. In this way one life touched another, which touched another spreading the message of charity and love much farther than to those few orphans who we helped with our monetary and educational contributions. The economic gap is a problem not only of people not having access to the material goods, but also of a community that is not ready to share the wealth amongst all its citizens.

Certainly, we are talking about a community that is still healing from a misguided dictatorship that ruled under the false name of communism and good for the working-man, and therein lays one of the greatest problems of the Chinese society. However, it is my sincere hope that through this project we were able to create a ripple effect of love and understanding that will help to further the healing efforts of this nation. Although we did not fix the problem of poverty in China, we brought new focus to these issues and allowed some people to better their lives through our hard work.

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