

71. VOLUNTEER TOURISM / VOLUNTOURISM - Contributions by Harng Luh Sin

I often start lectures that I give on volunteer tourism or voluntourism. Voluntourism as a term is often associated with negative associations of the commercialization of short-term international volunteering, and has been critiqued substantially in both popular and academic literature. Volunteer tourism however, was more commonly used in earlier academic literature and while critically discussed, is a far more neutral term to use. However, this area of study has evolved to use both terms substantially. Both terms are hence used interchangeably in this paper – reflecting not just the similarities in fact between what both describes, but also in recognition of the role that popular media critiques had on shaping this field of study by sharing my first ever international volunteering experience – it was in 2002; I was an undergraduate student from the National University of Singapore; and together with 41 other school mates, we went to Guangxi in China to volunteer in two then remote villages. People often ask voluntourists what they achieved in their stint overseas, and at times some would proudly detail what they did – teach English, build schools, dig wells, and other do-good, feel-good activities that fulfils one's stereotypical ideals about what poverty alleviation and pro-poor development in the Third World looks like.

I would like to share what we did:

1) On the first night of arriving at the village that we were supposed to “help”, just a grand six hours after getting there, we successfully knocked out the entire village's electricity supply and caused a village wide black out. This continued to occur many times a night for the next 18 nights we stayed there. As classic First World city-dwellers, we came with a full plethora of electronic devices that needed daily charging – laptops, mobile phones, cameras and of course a gigantic refrigerator for the entire team's use. Eventually, the Chinese officials managed to ship in an electricity generator and parked this right next to our accommodations. This finally resolved the problem of the consistent black outs. The villager could now have their electricity at night, while we can continue charging our multiple devices. Nobody sincerely considered the option of simply not charging or using some of these devices.

2) Based on some obscure beliefs, the student leaders of my team decided that the construction work that we were doing as volunteers was very taxing to our urban and delicate bodies, and hence it would be appropriate to mandate sufficient protein in our diets every day. They determined that this meant we were to eat at least two eggs per person every single day. This however, translated to needing 84 eggs every day, and in a village that only had a population a little more than a thousand, this was far more eggs that they produced. Soon, the drive to go local, buy local, and eat local, so as to ensure that our being in the village profited the villagers locally, became a problem rather than a benefit. At the suggestion of the Chinese officials, we began buying eggs from the two villages nearby – up and downstream of the river where our village was at. By the second week, we had bought all the eggs available from all three villages. We need to change the strategy, so the team leaders hired a car to drive members of the team to the nearest town (then about an hour away), just so we can buy eggs, chicken, and pork without eradicating all protein sources for the villagers where we were volunteering at. Again, eating less meat and protein, was never seriously considered.

3) The team had embarked on this journey with substantial funding provided by the National Youth Council in Singapore, then channeled through the Singapore International Foundation. On top of this, we also had a fairly successful fund-raising drive done before the trip. In total, each student participant paid only about S\$300 (roughly US\$168 based on 2002's average exchange rate of US\$1 = S\$1.79) for the 21 day trip. The leaders of the team further worked out a budget for expenses for the entire trip, and this included a 1,000

CNY (roughly US\$121 based on 2002's average exchange rate of US\$1 = 8.28 CNY) per day amount specifically allocated for buying groceries to cook meals every day. Fortunately or unfortunately, food produce was far cheaper than expected in these parts of China then, and the team leaders were appalled to find out that instead the team was only using an average of 300 CNY (US\$36) per day. The leaders pounded the entire team on this issue, "we use 1,000 CNY a day, if we did not use this money, the team will return to Singapore with a surplus, and what would we do with all that cash?" They went on next to hire the car (with driver), not only because we ate all the eggs available in the vicinity, but also because we needed to use this 1,000 CNY per day. Still, the car did not cost enough, and towards the final days, we actually bought fireworks. Till now, my mind cannot wrap around what exactly happened there. The extravagance in the face of the poverty we encountered, and why it was impossible to simply donate whatever "leftover money" we had to the schools that we were refurbishing – until today, I am not sure why this all happened.

These encounters in my very first volunteer tourism trip, the one I set out with grand ambitions of saving the poor and doing good because it was "a calling", inspired me to study volunteer tourism. Because all I found was my ideals crashing down with the illogics of what we were doing. Was it "life changing" as promised in those grandiose brochures advertising international volunteering as an "opportunity of your lifetime" that would "broaden your perspectives and make you come home a different person"? Yes, somewhat. It did disturb me so profoundly that I eventually made a Masters' degree, a PhD degree, and an academic career out of studying it.

Through this, I posited important questions to volunteer tourism as social phenomenon. From studying what was initially an embryotic emerging field in the early 2000s, to seeing the field boom and my own field sites in Cambodia become hot spots where thousands of voluntourists descended on villages, which then turned into the heavy critiques especially in social media since mid 2010s, and now to a global pandemic that shut international borders and made voluntourism all but impossible.

Critically understanding volunteer tourism – it is more often about the self rather than the other

In the early stages of volunteer tourism, much was said about its potential for pro-poor development and for a form of tourism that was peaceful, benign, and brought about understanding between different people across the First and Third Worlds (McGehee and Santos 2004; McIntosh and Zahra 2007; Wearing 2001; Zahra and McIntosh 2007). However, despite the then literatures championing the benefits of volunteer tourism for both volunteers and hosts, what was critically lacking was an acknowledgement especially within academic research that this burgeoning phenomenon is perhaps more about the self than the other. In a now highly cited and seminal piece, I explored the motivations of 11 student volunteers from Singapore to South Africa, and found that at least among those in this study, motivating factors for volunteer tourists were predominantly "to travel" rather than "to contribute" or volunteer (Sin, 2009). Volunteering in the local community was also but one of the many means of travelling to different destinations to "learn about local cultures" or to "go beyond superficial tour packages where you don't see how people really live". This intervention initiated a critical relook into volunteer tourism at a time when it was becoming extremely popular, especially within educational institutions that favoured new out of classroom pedagogies combined with an appealing international experience that differentiated their educational package offered from other more traditional methods of education. Volunteer tourism was used as an experience that volunteer tourists used to perform a self, suggesting that he or she was a conscious and worldly tourist or individual.

This emphasis on the self in volunteer tourism perhaps seems like a given now with what we popularly understand of voluntourism and its criticisms. Yet, before Sin (2009), limited studies directly questioned and focused on such issues (see however, Guttentag, 2009; Raymond and Hall, 2008). This paper pressed many to acknowledge that instead of leaving such emphasis on the self in the background, it is important

to realize upfront that many volunteer tourists are typically more interested in fulfilling objectives relating to the self. This puts away the altruistic perception of volunteer tourism and allows one to critically assess the nature of volunteer tourism much like any other form of tourism—whether considered as mass or alternative tourism. It also pointed out that the meant that volunteer tourism could indeed be reinforcing negative stereotypes of aid-recipients as inferior or less-able through the process of othering by volunteer tourists (a line of thought further developed in Sin, 2010), and warned that volunteer tourism cannot be seen in an apolitical manner or assumed to naturally be pro-poor or socially just. Thankfully, in the years that has since passed, academic studies and popular media pressed on such issues with fervour, and today our understanding of volunteer tourism has come a long way since the early days with important critical works that continue to emerge (see for example, Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017; Butcher, 2017; Conran, 2011; Henry, 2019; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Prince, 2017; Wearing, Young & Everingham, 2017; Wearing et. al. 2018).

Responsibilities and care in (messy) practice

Yet, the understanding of volunteer tourism must not be slanted towards a one-sided criticism of such activities without a careful review of the broader dynamics in society that was driving its popularity. When I started doing research in this field, I frequently had to tell students that volunteer tourism was not all good – “look at the bigger picture, the situation is far more complex than what rosy, heartwarming promotional material make it out to be”. In recent years, I had to do the opposite, students would ask: is volunteer tourism all bad? Am I a bad person if I wanted to volunteer internationally? And now I have to tell students that volunteer tourism is not all bad – “look at the bigger picture, this situation is far more complex than what dire, apocalyptic criticisms make it out to be”. But perhaps, what is most important, is in understanding that like everything else in life, volunteer tourism does often exist somewhere between these two polemic ends, and binaries are not a good way of understanding it (and most other things anyway).

As social scientists, we must resist the ease of building up a straw man defined by its ignorance and arrogance towards the multiple issues of development in the Third World. The Barbie Savior¹ may be useful to analyze as a viral social media campaign (as we did in Sin and He, 2018), but academic studies must take care not to start off with presumed biases of the volunteer tourist to be Barbie Savior. Instead, volunteer tourism is shaped by how individual acts of responsibility and care is enmeshed in ordinary practices (Sin 2014; 2017) and the broader neoliberalizing of responsibilities in society (Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad, 2015, and Sin and Minca 2014).

As Hilton's (2007) works called for the recognition of the ordinariness of consumption choices, it can be said that much like elsewhere in how we live the rest of life, volunteer tourists continue to make very ordinary decisions and banal actions that shapes how responsibilities and care is eventually practiced. This means they can attempt to be responsible especially in their tours and travels yet remain entrenched in all sorts of irresponsibilities both consciously and subconsciously. One is always simultaneously and continuously responsible and irresponsible (Sin 2014; 2017). Indeed, despite how it is often pitched in responsible and ethical tourism or consumption campaigns, it is in fact not easy at all to be responsible. Rather, we can learn a lot about our responsibility and yet continue to have difficulty pursuing a course of action that is deemed to be suitably responsible. Yet, volunteer tourists are expected to be good and critical judges on practices on the ground, and to flag out transgressions as and when these occur. These fail to recognise the nuances of issues at hand, while ignoring the performativities of dependencies and responsibilities on the ground by hosts and locals of volunteer tourism (Sin, 2010). There is therefore a need to understand responsibilities as

1. Barbie Savior is a fictitious character created to parody and question critically what voluntourists and mission workers do in the Third World. It gained viral status since its launch in 2017 and highlights the role of humour and satire in pitching ethical considerations in voluntourism.

they emerge in practices on the ground, and look at these beyond judgmental binaries of good and bad. Instead, many volunteer tourism situations on the ground can be better understood as being in a process of becoming, while continually facing, overcoming and realising aspects of volunteer tourism that needs to be changed and adapted.

At a broader level, volunteer tourism also needs to be critically understood against the neoliberal forces driving society's expectations of responsible development (see Sin, Oakes and Mostafanezhad, 2015; Mostafanezhad 2014). Indeed, the rise of volunteer tourism runs alongside massive shifts fuelled by fair trade movements and ethical consumption drives, and an increasing mistrust in central authorities' and big corporations' abilities to address issues of equitable development and poverty alleviation. What we can observe through volunteer tourism, is this trend of 'privatization' and the 'NGOization' of development (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; Roy 2012) in at least two ways. First, there has been a rapid expansion in the development field of opportunities for relatively well-off volunteers from the Global North to directly take part in development aid projects. Such opportunities were rare in earlier times when development was primarily in the hands of the state and conceived in terms of more institutional and large-scale project. Second, to the extent that development has been depoliticized and rendered as a challenge for individuals and communities to tackle in their efforts to overcome poverty, volunteer tourism reflects the individualization of mainstream development practice. Volunteer tourists become ideal providers of development in a world that has seemingly chosen to forget about the structures of global capitalism that perpetuate poverty and inequality. Volunteer tourism can thus be productively viewed as a form of neoliberal governmentality, a kind of 'technology of the self' through which subjects constitute themselves simultaneously as competitive, entrepreneurial, market-based, individualized actors *and* caring, responsible, active, global citizens (Sin, Oakes & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Sin and Minca, 2014).

Beyond white girls and barbie saviors

A large part of my research also highlights how volunteer tourism is not just a Global North to Global South endeavour. The very premise of studies of volunteers originating from Singapore provided much insight on the diversity in volunteer tourism as a social phenomenon, much as how recent works detailing volunteer tourism from South Korea and China have too emerged over time (Lee & Yen, 2015; Lo & Lee, 2011; Meng et. al. 2020; Wu, Fu & Kang, 2018). A common response amongst Singaporean students is that unlike Barbie Savior, they certainly cannot be guilty of being the 'White Savior' because they are not White. Inherent in such responses are the assumed cultural sensitivities of being 'Asian like their hosts' (see also Baillie Smith et al., 2018; Sin, 2010). Indeed, it is important to question – does not being White make one less prone to the pitfalls of volunteer tourism? Are responsibilities universalized notions that apply regardless of where they occur? The dominance of English language and Global North perspectives in the study of volunteer tourism perhaps presents only one side of the picture. In China, for example, the idea of educated youths spending time in poor rural areas to learn and volunteer, can be traced back to the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s-70s and its "Down to Countryside Movement" (Schoppa, 2006). These all potentially presents peculiar positionings researchers need to dwell deeper in to understand. It is indeed vital to realise that what is deemed responsible or not is highly plural and contextual and needs to adopt a postcolonial decentering of knowledges and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and Western domination (see Said 1978; Young 2001; Sharp 2008). To this end, much of my work pushes academia to focus on thinking and talking about responsibility in a postcolonial and nuanced manner (see Blunt and McEwan 2002; Robinson 2003; Jazeel & McFarlane 2010) that looks not only at what are celebrated as responsible practices but also why and what makes a practice responsible or not in the specific contexts in which these practices are being carried out.

Finally, even as the narratives of 'poor but happy' encounters in volunteer tourism imply that voluntourists can harness their emotions to trivialize and romanticize impoverishment in the Third World, it is important to critically consider the nuances of how these occur as Sin and He (2019) considers (see also, Crossley,

2012). What are the subjective negotiations of the self in reflections on personal sensibilities regarding volunteer tourists' experiences? To assume that voluntourists are naively unaware of the contradictions and critiques of their representations of the Third World is perhaps to miss the point entirely. The desire to engage with the Third World, or to know the Third World, remains a strong rhetoric in numerous areas – youth development, cosmopolitanism, education and so on. There is arguably indeed value in encouraging privileged people to consider the lives and well-being of those beyond their immediate circles. The question therefore is how one can do so while opening up conversations on the problematic issues of doing so – just as my very first encounters did as detailed above did. How do we acknowledge the complex negotiations and emotions voluntourists may encounter – in their fears of being just like Barbie Savior and their attempts to be nothing like Barbie Savior?

Perhaps volunteer tourism in itself is never going to be good or bad. It was always going to be both.

Written by Harnng Luh Sin, Singapore Management University, Singapore

[Read Harnng Luh's letter to future generations of tourism researchers](#)

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