

South China Morning Post

Hong Kong / Society

Xinlu Liang

Published: 12:00pm, 13 Nov, 2021

Eye-opening experience: Hong Kong student volunteers build bridges in remote mainland Chinese villages, make friends for life

- Projects by Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation draw 5,500 students, volunteers from Hong Kong and mainland
- Exhibition at Central Market showcases volunteers' work in poor Chinese communities over past 15 years



Students volunteering with the Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation build a bridge in Fengshan village, located in a mountainous area of Chongqing. Photo: Weibo

Hongkonger Wong Chung-shing has never forgotten his first trip to Fengshan village in a mountainous area of the sprawling municipality of Chongqing, five hours by bus from the city's international airport.

“I used to visit my relatives in Guangdong province every year, but I’d never been to a place so poor and underdeveloped,” said Wong, recalling his experience in 2017 as a student of construction and environment at Polytechnic University.

The village had an unstable tap water supply, no street lights and no footbridge for villagers to cross a river that ran through it.

Wong was in a group of more than 70 university students from Hong Kong and mainland China who went to the remote village to build the bridge it lacked.



Wong Chung-shing helped build a footbridge during his first trip to the mainland with the foundation. Photo: Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation

Without enough accommodation, they curled up in sleeping bags at the village committee office that January, when temperatures dropped to 2 or 3 degrees Celsius at night.

Within a week, they had built the bridge, forged friendships and derived deep satisfaction from helping the villagers.

It was life-changing for Wong. “The gap between urban and rural areas is huge, and it might take years for poor regions to catch up,” he said. “This can’t be changed by one single project or one nationwide policy.”

The trip was organised by the Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) Charitable Foundation, which was set up in Hong Kong in 2007.

It supports rural revitalisation on the mainland through environmentally friendly construction projects while also building bridges of friendship between student participants from Hong Kong and the mainland.



Students work together to build a bridge in a remote area of Chongqing. Photo: Weibo

The foundation is showcasing its development and projects over the past 15 years with an exhibition at the Central Market from November 11 to 15.

Wong, who graduated in 2019, said his first experience in Fengshan proved so rewarding he took part in more projects over the next three years and became a coordinator for the team at PolyU.

More than 5,500 students and volunteers from 22 universities and institutions in Hong Kong and the mainland have taken part in various projects over the years.

They have built 52 footbridges and numerous community enrichment projects, and erected 203 buildings using the sustainable rammed earth technique. These have benefited more than 79,000 underprivileged villagers in remote areas.



Hugo Law with a child in the Yunnan province village where he was sent by the foundation. Photo: Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation

“The project is a life education for the students,” said businesswoman Leonie Ki Man-fung, founder and honorary president of the foundation.

“Many go thinking they are there to help others, but eventually end up learning something valuable themselves, that living simply can be really happy.”

Hang Seng University graduate Hugo Law Kwai-nam, 23, a fitness coach, took part in the programme while he was a student, and it helped him understand mainlanders better, especially the poor.

He learned the importance of putting himself in the shoes of the villagers. “Sometimes we have to know what the villagers really want, instead of imposing what we think is good for them,” he said.



Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation student volunteers pose on the bridge they built in Fengshan village. Photo: Weibo

He said Hong Kong participants also realised how much better off they were compared to the poor mainlanders they met, and that helped them appreciate life in the city.

“We shouldn’t take everything for granted, but need to be humble and grateful,” he said.

The programme has continued through the Covid-19 pandemic, even though Hong Kong students have not been able to cross the border.

Instead, they have met mainland students over video conferences and done research, while those on the mainland carried out the physical work in the villages.

Assistant Professor Michael Chan Chung of PolyU’s School of Design, a long-time mentor with the programme, said first-hand experience was most useful for national education.

“Hong Kong parents are always teaching children that they should love their country and city, but field experience is the best way to achieve the goal,” he said.

“When students from both sides are doing the same thing and overcoming difficulties together, they’ll have a deep friendship and deeper understanding of each other. Friends in adversity are the most precious kind of friends.”

This article appeared in the South China Morning Post print edition as: Students build bridges of friendship on mainland



Xinlu Liang

+ FOLLOW

Xinlu Liang joined the Post as a Graduate Trainee in 2021. Previously, she wrote obituaries as a Covid-19 reporting intern at the Los Angeles Times. She holds a master's degree in journalism from the University of Southern California, and a bachelor's degree in English from Sun Yat-sen University.

South China Morning PostSUBSCRIBESEARCH

China society
+ FOLLOW

Hong Kong / Society

Eye-opening experience: Hong Kong student volunteers build bridges in remote mainland Chinese villages, make friends for life

- Projects by Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation draw 5,500 students, volunteers from Hong Kong and mainland
- Exhibition at Central Market showcases volunteers' work in poor Chinese communities over past 15 years

Xinlu Liang
Published: 12:00pm, 13 Nov, 2021

+ FOLLOW

Why you can trust SCMP

TOP PICKS
314

Tailored gift offerings make for strong sales drivers

Feld Post
PayPal

News
Over half of iron pots contain metals above safety mark: Hong Kong watchdog
15 Nov 2021

News
Hong Kong buyers pay more to snap up tiny flats with garden
15 Nov 2021

Magazines
K-drama's top 10 male luxury brand ambassadors, from Hyun Bin to Gong Yoo

Students volunteering with the Wu Zhi Qiao Charitable Foundation build a bridge in Fenoshan village, located in a mountainous area of Chongqing. Photo: Weibo

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/3155945/eye-opening-experience-hong-kong-student-volunteers-build>

[END]