Foundation-University Partnership As An Approach To Building Third Sector Capacity In China

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China’s economy has developed tremendously during the past three decades, lifting millions out of poverty, building a national infrastructure, and becoming highly competitive. At the same time, there have been problems as a result of success as well as difficulties that have become more pronounced, such as an educational system biased toward urbanites, environmental degradation, and uneven access to quality health care. As China’s population ages and overall economy slows, the gap between the extent of these problems and the government’s ability to meet them may grow. Philanthropy is often viewed as a source of amelioration of these tensions; yet it is not a panacea. This paper will focus on a multi-year partnership designed to foster the growth of philanthropy and nonprofit management education in China, with the larger goal of supporting the development of the third sector in China.

In the broadest sense, philanthropy is defined as “voluntary action for the public good” (Payton 1988, 7). Jon Van Til (1990, 34) draws on both values and operational aspects in a conception of philanthropy as “the voluntary giving and receiving of time and money aimed (however imperfectly) toward the needs of charity and the interests of all in a better quality of life.” In the context of China, Wang (2006) acknowledges the emergent institutional environment and state-private sector relationships, and focuses instead on values that characterize the burgeoning philanthropic sector in China as being motivated by care, voluntary in nature, and oriented toward the leverage of other financial or human resources. Certainly, during the past decade, we have seen the emergence of NGO-type and other social welfare organizations, foundations, social entrepreneurship, and a spirit of volunteerism, with extensive collaboration from non-Chinese organizations. In 2011, total philanthropy in China was estimated as $13.5 billion, up from only $1.6 billion in 2006 (China Foundation Center).

Yet for all its promise, China’s philanthropic sector appears to exhibit some pathologies common to China’s overall political system: a heavy reliance on state initiative, inadequate transparency, corruption, insufficient regulatory support for charitable donations, and weak norms relating to conflict of interest and transparency.

Although these problems are broadly understood, a review of the literature and a scan of practice reveal a relative dearth of scholarly research on philanthropy in China as well as rapid growth in university-based philanthropy initiatives. There have been a sizeable number of studies by Western scholars on NGOs and the non-profit sector in China, which provide a useful window into the challenges of NGOs (for example, Deng 2011, Hildebrandt 2011, Hippe and Pissler 2010, Hsu 2010, Shieh and Deng 2011, Simon 2009, Sipes 2011, Unger 2008, Zheng and Fewsmith 2008). Since 2000 there have been at least 800 scholarly articles on the philanthropic sector by Chinese scholars, as well. Despite the large amount of work, this scholarship to date is largely descriptive and emergent.

In this paper presentation, scholars and funders engaged in a joint, collaborative exchange program designed to build philanthropy education in southern China will: 1) review the gaps in the literature and needed research directions; 2) discuss the landscape of third sector capacity support in China, with a focus on formal programs in nonprofit management education, and 3) reflect on a multi-year partnership among the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the IU Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, and China’s first School of Philanthropy at Sun Yat-sen University in
Guangzhou China. The colloquy will include faculty from both schools, as well as foundation program officers, and will have broad appeal to ISTR members interested in China’s third sector, third sector development in changing economies, and innovative approaches to partnerships and nonprofit management education. The presenters will approach their ISTR presentation from a perspective of reflective practice, with opportunities for audience input.