

# **PROMOTING SERVICE LEARNING IN CHINA**

**Historical, Cross-Cultural, and Interdisciplinary  
Issues and Perspectives**

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# Service Learning Defined

“...a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.”  
(National Commission on Service-Learning, USA)

# Community Service Context: A Policy Analysis Framework (Morris, 1985)

- Society's aspirations or goals
- Social norms or “societal policy”
- A guide to the priority aims and preferred means, or “general public policy (GPP)”
- Sectoral public policy (e.g., education, health, and personal social services)
- The leadership role of governmental units in moving beyond or in modifying social norms
- Advocated vs. adopted policy
- Criteria for assessing policy guidelines (e.g., charity vs. rights, and distributive-regulative vs. redistributive)

# Economic State in Transition (Chen, 1996,2004): A Perspective on Social Change in China

- The socialist economic state
- Politicization of Chinese state and society
- De-politicization and commercialization after 1978
- Enterprise reform and community service movement
- De-economicization of Chinese state
- Civil society and “service government”
- Social problems and community needs
- Opportunity window now: a GPP for more balanced development (Chen, 2002, 2008)

# “Service” in Chinese Higher Education Policy

- Societal aspirations, norms, and GPP: A mix of accomplishments and lip services under the motto “Serve the People” during different historical periods
- Higher education as a social institution has experienced dramatic changes, from “serve proletarian politics” to “serve moderniza-tional construction” under the changing GPP
- “Serve the people” is now given new/special attention in Chinese higher education policy

# Service Learning (so far) with Chinese Characteristics

- Focus on education combined with economic production work
- New emphasis on “social practice”

旧教育方针：教育必须为社会主义现代化建设服务，必须与生产劳动相结合，培养德、智、体等方面全面发展的社会主义事业的建设者和接班人。

新教育方针：坚持教育为社会主义现代化建设服务，为人民服务，与生产劳动和社会实践相结合，培养德智体美全面发展的社会主义建设者和接班人。

# Case Study (HUAS)

- Curriculum requirements: 15%+ of required credit hours for HSS and 25%+ for SE and agriculture (internship, experimentation, and technical design/graduation thesis)
- Broader concepts and categories: centralized practice teaching and learning vs. distributed practice teaching and learning
- “Social practice” may be part of centralized practice teaching and learning under various terms and requirements; also refers to more or less organized student extracurricular activities

# Cross-Cultural Considerations

- From “serve the people” (political slogan) to community service/civic responsibility (real/specific commitment)
- From service to learning: an emphasis on the teaching and learning that occur through service (often connected to classroom objectives and eligible for academic credit)
- Connecting “social practice” with “service learning”: promoting service as a learning activity and pedagogy requires a more systematic approach and more international exchange



# (Inter-)disciplinary Perspectives

- The elimination and reestablishment of social science disciplines in China, including social work/human services
- General education vs. specialized training; relevance to different disciplines (both students and faculty)

# Major Issues

- Empirical evidence of the impact of social practice on the development of the student as a whole person
- Need for research guidance and best-practice examples on service-learning project design, including learning objectives and outcomes assessment
- The role of service-learning centers, training workshops, and international exchange

# Conclusion

- National context: a historical moment in favor of community service
- “Serve the people” and “social practice” are highlighted in Chinese higher education policy
- Service learning can be helpful to the transition of GPP toward a service government
- Promoting service learning should emphasize on learning activity and pedagogy

# Conclusion (continued)

- A need for research guidance and best-practice examples on service-learning project design
- The key is to bridge over the gap between “social practice” and “service learning”
- The role of policy makers, service-learning centers, training workshops, and international exchange

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