Cool Mountain Education Fund: Launching an NGO in a Minority Village

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Abstract:

This article details the development of a non-governmental organization (NGO), the Cool Mountain Education Fund (http://www.coolmountainfund.com), which supports schooling in a set of villages in Sichuan Province’s Liangshan Prefecture. It frames the position of an NGO as a pivot or relay between its beneficiaries—a remote mountain school in China and its teachers, students, parents and alumni—and its donors—mostly middle-class Americans with no experience in remote village settings. As a pivot, the NGO has the doubly difficult task of serving the beneficiaries and keeping the donations coming in, purposes that are not always congruent with each other. The paper explores the pivotal position of the NGO from its founding to the present, drawing connections between the social and political conditions in the school setting and the importance of flexibility and adaptability in the work of an NGO.

1 A version of this paper was presented to the panel, “Media and Mediation: NGOs and Civic Associations in 21st Century China,” at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Philadelphia on March 26, 2010.
Introduction:

It is ordinarily the place of scholars to analyze and write about the work of NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) (e.g., Escobar 1995, Fisher 1997, Markowitz 2001). But sometimes scholars become involved in supporting or even founding and managing NGOs. When they do, they face ethical and practical questions about raising and managing limited funds, ensuring participation of the beneficiary communities, remaining neutral among factions within the beneficiary communities, and resolving disputes between members and activists within the NGO. When the NGO operates in a society such as China without guarantees of certain individual and institutional freedoms, these questions may become compounded.

This paper focuses on the dilemmas and possible solutions faced by a crowd of dedicated amateurs—American and Chinese professors and students—in their rather Quixotic quest to do something useful as an adjunct to their research.\(^2\) On its budget of less than $20,000 a year, this motley crew developed the Cool Mountain Education Fund (CMEF), a small, all-volunteer NGO based in the United States that supports educational activities in rural southwest China. Founded in 2005 to support activities and operations in a Liangshan Prefecture village, CMEF grew out of the scholars’ involvement in founding and advising the elementary school whose teachers and graduates are its main beneficiaries.

A key structural dilemma for an NGO is managing its relations with two constituencies—the donors and the beneficiaries—who may not know much about each other. Organizations raise money from people with a charitable impulse and spend the money to benefit peripheral communities, but people in those communities often have understandings and goals that differ greatly from those who donate the money, and often from those who spend it as well. NGOs are

\(^2\) For discussions about the complicated role of the anthropologist and the politics of engagement with communities where anthropologists work, see Barley 2000 [1983]; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Jaarsma 2002; Lassiter 2001; Metcalf 2002; and Smith 1999.
positioned as pivots or relays between charitable donors and the communities they serve. The trick to success is balancing these constituencies—making an appeal to donors that will activate their charitable impulses while continuing to pursue the real goal of the organization—to benefit those it seeks to serve. Anthropological analysis of NGOs tends to concentrate—perhaps rightly so—on the second arm of the pivot, on how the goals, programs, and methods of the NGO do or do not reflect the desires and articulated needs of the beneficiaries, on the question of what constitutes participation, and on the inequalities of political power, race, education and other structural factors that are inherent in any relationship between helpers and the people helped (Escobar 1995, and Markowitz 2001). But in fact, no NGO can succeed without donors, who understand and sympathize with the project strongly enough to give money, goods, or time to the work. Thus part of the problem for an NGO is one of communication: how do NGO workers calibrate their own analyses and prescriptions about “what the beneficiaries need” with the beneficiaries own analyses and prescriptions? And when an understanding is reached between the community and the NGO, what is the message to donors that will obtain and ensure their continued support? Operating the pivot successfully thus depends on balancing two channels of communication.

The CMEF has faced the pivotal problem through our relationships with the teachers, students, and parents of our school in Liangshan, and with the donors who keep us operating. In understanding our predicament and ways to deal with it, we have found Ron Eglash’s concept of a two-way bridge to communications, digital and otherwise (2002), to be very useful. Eglash points out that communication is not, at its core, a problem of media, or of the “digital divide” that has been such a popular slogan since the rise of the Internet. The concept of a digital divide assumes that communities lack resources that must then be provided supplanted by benevolent outsiders coming to offer technologies. Media are part of the communication process, but the content is at least as important as the medium (cf. Ginsburg 2008).
In the case of the CMEF, we have learned as much from Nuosu villagers about culture, ecology, and contemporary village life as we have offered access to schooling and ideas from outside their community. But our goals and those of the community members have sometimes coincided and sometimes not. Here we analyze how we have collaborated to support some mutually valued projects: high quality schooling for village children and piped water for village households; and how we have struggled to align our goals in other areas, including ecological protection and Nuosu language literacy, with realities of village life and the Chinese examination-based educational system. We reflect on how we have communicated this history of success and failure, mutual understanding and misunderstanding, to those who generously support our work.

The educational aims of our organization are shared by many other large and small NGOs operating in China, but analyses of education-focused NGOs have been surprisingly few, given the number of organizations involved in these efforts, and the vast gray literature generated by their work (Zhao and Hu 2007; China Tomorrow Education Fund, Rural China Education Foundation, Save the Children, Trace Foundation, and Zigen). The few studies we have found focus either on Chinese NGOs such as Project Hope and the Spring Bud project (Hsu 2008, Ross 2006) or deal primarily with the development of environmental education (Chen 2010, Efird, forthcoming). While environmental education is an important project which our organization supports, our primary aim here is to contribute to a discussion of the growing internationally affiliated NGO sector working to support education in China. As a UNESCO report explained, while the international NGOs are not providing significant amounts of money in the overall scheme of education expenses, they have played an important role in providing

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3 Some information can be found online, on organization websites and as annual reports, but these often exist as publicity and marketing tools, and lack the ability to critically analyze their work and their role in a broader context. For a representative example, see Rural China Education Foundation 2009.
4 Ross (2006) discusses the roles NGOs and the state play in Chinese schooling, focusing on gender and equity in her analysis.
technical expertise (Zhao and Hu 2007). How our work fits with these national goals, and how our relationship to these goals affects our communication with beneficiaries and donors, is another topic we consider here.

The following discussion begins with an overview of the relevant history of nongovernmental organizations in China and then looks closely at the Cool Mountain Education Fund, considering its history, operations, collaborations, challenges, and accomplishments. It concludes with some questions about ongoing work for organizations supporting Chinese education.

The Role of NGOs in China

Foreign-based NGOs play an increasingly important role in China, providing services that the state is either unable or unwilling to provide (Lu 2005, Ma 2005, Zhang and Baum 2004). Since the turn away from strict socialist economic and social controls in the late 1970s and the slow collapse of the ‘iron rice bowl’ surety of cradle-to-grave support by the government, the gap between those who have wealth (in connections, opportunities, and money) and those who do not has increased greatly (Naughton 2007: 209-227). Despite many significant efforts by the Hu-Wen administration to address growing inequality, results have been modest, particularly with regard to regions that have historically lagged behind the wealthier coastal provinces, macroregional cores, or urban areas. To reduce these inequities, NGOs have been permitted to step in and provide support, particularly in education, health care, and poverty alleviation (Ma 2005).

Many international NGOs target the periphery of China, specifically, the mountainous regions populated by ethnic minority peoples. Despite bountiful natural resources in the areas where they live, many of these areas remain economically impoverished (cf. Harwood 2009).
While very rudimentary government services were established during the 1950s and early 1960s, as the central state reduced subsidies to local governments in the 1980s and 1990s, education and health systems suffered. The standard of living—perhaps always low, but less noticeably so when virtually all Chinese had a low material standard of living—improved only slowly. Families had little ready cash; schools suffered from run-down facilities, lack of materials, and lack of trained staff (Hannum 2003).

The situation of the Nuosu, who inhabit the high mountains and deep valleys of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in southwest Sichuan province (The Cool Mountains, after which the CMEF is named), exemplifies the problems with social services in minority areas and the ways in which NGOs have stepped in to partially fill the gap. A “subgroup” (支系) of the Yi minority nationality (minzu), the Nuosu were effectively independent of Chinese state control until the 1950s, practicing a silvio-pastoral-agricultural livelihood system (Lin 1960, Winnington 1962). They continue to maintain their Tibeto-Burman language as well as ritual, ceremonial and artistic traditions. CMEF works in a cluster of four villages in a small valley butting up against the Tibetan plateau in western Liangshan. It is entirely populated by Nuosu, who continue to derive their livelihoods from farming, forestry, and herding.\(^5\) Although an increasing number of households have consumer goods such as televisions and satellite dishes, VCRs and even a few motorcycles, they are still constrained by the unreliable electricity in the area. Not all families or all people have cell phones, and due to the high mountains, many places lie outside reception areas.

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The History of the CMEF

CMEF came into being to address needs that were expressed to its founders with a history of research and philanthropic involvement in the Valley. Stevan Harrell, an anthropologist at the University of Washington, had engaged in collaborative research in the area since the early 1990s (Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007, 2012). Working with several partners—Li Xingxing, an ethnic Han anthropologist in the provincial capital of Chengdu, Mgebbu Lunzy (Ma Erzi), a Yangjuan native and ethnic Yi researcher in the prefectural capital of Xichang, and Benoît Vermander, a French Jesuit priest, painter, poet, and theologian interested in Nuosu religion—he helped fund construction of a primary school in Yangjuan (Vermander 2008). The school would be open to the children of Yangjuan and the surrounding villages of Pianshui, Gangou, and Zhuchang. While a school in nearby Baiwu town provided primary and middle-school education, to attend required a minimum hour’s walk each way for the closest children and walks of multiple hours for children from Gangou and Zhuchang—difficult for children as young as six years old. Living in the Baiwu school dormitories was also problematic, as families often could not afford the fees and worried about small children living away from parents or relatives. A survey conducted in 1999 revealed that only about 26% of the children aged 6-13 in the four villages were currently attending school, most of them concentrated in a few dominant clans in Yangjuan.\(^6\)

The Yangjuan Primary School opened in 2000 with rather utopian goals: providing Han-Nuosu bilingual education with a focus on maintaining local environmental knowledge in kindergarten through 6\(^{\text{th}}\) grades, as well as providing extracurricular activities for schoolchildren and offering adult education programs. School attendance for village children increased to over 80% in the first year of its operation (92% of the boys and 74% of the girls), and the school

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\(^6\) This low attendance rate mirrors patterns observed in other rural, ethnic minority communities at that time by scholars like Gerard Postiglione (2000).
quickly became a focus of activity on the part of all sorts of outsiders. Fr. Vermander and his colleague Fr. Jacques Duraud brought helping delegations for several summers spanning from 2001-2006, providing everything from a pottery workshop taught by a devout Taiwanese Buddhist potter to a public health assessment by a Bunun aboriginal nurse from Taiwan to computers donated by a wealthy Catholic businessman based in Beijing. Fr. Vermander also enlisted the enthusiastic cooperation of several of his artistic and educational associates in Chengdu, including painter Professor Li Jinyuan, photographer Liang Wei, and educator Fu Chunmin, who soon became Tami Blumenfield’s partner in a teacher-training workshop on traditional knowledge. Harrell and his colleagues from the University of Washington and Sichuan University began in 2002 to bring ecological and anthropological research teams of faculty, graduate students and undergraduates, who have produced a large volume of published and unpublished research in English and Chinese (Ho 2004; Chi 2004; Warren 2005; Kyllo 2006; Brown 2006; Trac et al. 2007; Sung 2008; Chan and Harrell 2009; Niou 2010; Urgenson et al. 2010; Morgan 2011; Grub 2012). Two undergraduate members of these teams, Victoria Poling and Philip Chi, both students in the UW College of Forest Resources, were founding members of CMEF. While Harrell was involved with the creation of the school, two of his doctoral advisees were introduced to the Valley and the school through their research. Barbara Grub began studying livestock development and the environment in Yangjuan and Pianshui in 2002 for her doctoral dissertation, and Tami Blumenfield conducted education research and teacher training in 2004 and 2005.

Between 2000 and 2004, several things had become clear. First, in spite of many efforts, the school was not going to be self-sustaining. It was begun according to the financial model of *min ban gong zhu*, 民办公助, or “locally administered with official help,” meaning that the Yanyuan County Education Office provided only limited financial support, mostly in the form of teachers’ salaries. The Education Office never assigned the school its full quota of teachers,
which as the school grew from its original three grades to the full 6-year system, would have meant 11 teachers including the principal. At various times, there have been between 4 and 8 teachers on state salary, meaning that the remaining teachers had to be paid with “local” funds—in effect, funds provided by outsiders. In addition, the school needed to pay its own electric and telephone bills, as well as offer the kinds of supplements and bonuses that were thought to encourage teachers to work harder, and even to retain them, in what they deemed a remote and inaccessible place. From 2003 to 2005, the school had a jeep donated by a Chengdu businessman; despite outside funding, the jeep was finally sold because the school could not afford the license fees, road taxes, fuel, and repair bills. Various friends of the school managed to scrounge one-time contributions for the school’s expenses, by means ranging from an art auction at the Seattle Art Museum to appeals to various Catholic charities in Europe. But there was a need for a more reliable and systematic source of assistance.

Second and unfortunately, it became clear that the rather utopian plans for the school as a source for community education and renewal were not going to be fully realized. While offering locally relevant education that differed from homogenizing Han-centric curricula was foremost among the goals of the schools’ foreign founders, Chinese partners, both Han and Nuosu, viewed the school’s central role as preparing students to succeed in an examination-based educational culture. Adult education was held only in the first year, and extracurricular activities happened at the whim of outsiders from Chengdu, Taiwan, Europe, and North America. But as if to compensate for this unrealized utopia, the school performed very well according to conventional Chinese measures. As the initial three classes progressed through the grade system toward graduation, joined by a new first grade class each year, year after year the students’ final exam scores were among the highest in the county. The scores were often

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7 This difference in educational philosophies is frequently discussed in the literature on local teaching materials, especially in the context of efforts to develop environmental education curricula. For some examples, see Blumenfield (2005), Chen (2010), and Wang (2010).
comparable to the modern urban schools in the county seat, far exceeding those not only of other village schools but of the six-year complete primary school (六年完小) in the nearby Baiwu town.\(^8\) In Spring 2005 as the first class was due to graduate, it seemed that many of them were doing well enough to be able to expect exam scores that would get them admitted to some of the better middle schools in the county seat, and perhaps even in the prefectural capital at Xichang.

At that time, families had seen very little change in their living standards since the late 1990s; remittances from migrant labor were just beginning to make a difference. A government policy to encourage poor areas to implement the legally mandated nine years of free and compulsory education—the so-called liangmian yibu 两免一补 or two exemptions (from tuition and schoolbook fees) and one subsidy (of living expenses)—had yet to reach any but the wealthiest parts of Liangshan.\(^9\) It was clear that when the first class graduated, most of them would need help if their parents were to be able to afford to send them to middle school. In fall 2004 Katharine Liang, an undergraduate who had done research in Yangjuan, suggested creating and selling in the US a calendar of photos taken by students and other visitors to raise funds for scholarships and promote the school. The project met with considerable success in 2004, raising several thousand dollars to fund 27 scholarships for Yangjuan Primary School graduates. In a “grand” ceremony at the school in August 2005, three students received scholarships to the Prefectural Nationalities Middle School in Xichang, 11 went to the County Nationalities Middle School in Yanyuan, and 13 others received small awards if they promised to attend other less prestigious, less costly middle schools. Based on the success of this first

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\(^8\) See Kipnis 2011 for a cogent discussion of the ways in which desire for schooling is developed in China. While the Nuosu experience with the ‘educational desire’ described by Kipnis is somewhat different, many of the younger Nuosu, and their families, espouse an interest in reaching primary school graduation, at a minimum.

\(^9\) For a discussion of the two-exemptions one-subsidy policy, see Lu and Ross 2008. This special issue of *Chinese Education and Society* examines the policy and its effectiveness. Guo (2008) and Zhu (2008) find the coverage in minority nationality areas remains far from universal.
fundraising activity, and realizing the importance of a legal structure on which to base future fundraising, the CMEF was born.

CMEF Structure

CMEF was incorporated as a 501c(3) non-profit in the summer of 2005, with pro bono legal help from the Seattle firm of Garvey Schubert Barer, which is active in international trade between China and the State of Washington. The founding members of the CMEF Board of Directors were anthropology professor Stevan Harrell, anthropology graduate students Tami Blumenfield and Barbara Grub, and then-recent UW graduate Victoria Poling. Board membership has varied over the six years since its incorporation, adding several current and former UW students, some of whom still serve, as well as the Chinese ethnologist and Yi expert Li Xingxing, one of the founders of Yangjuan School. Nancy Meenen, a former administrator of the University of Washington undergraduate exchange program with Sichuan University, served from 2008-2011 as Board Treasurer. She visited Yangjuan in 2005 and worked with many students who had done research there. As the owner of a successful business franchise, Ms. Meenen contributed much needed skills to the CMEF board. The majority of Board members remain former and current students of Harrell’s who have done research in the Yangjuan area.

The main goals of the organization are:

- To provide scholarships for graduates of the Yangjuan Primary School going to middle school, to high school (starting in 2008), and to college (in 2011);
- To provide funds for the maintenance of Yangjuan Primary School, including assisting with ‘substitute’, or daike, teachers’ salaries – which allows the school to serve all village children who want to attend, and attracts higher quality teachers, as well as providing New Year and year-end bonuses for both regular and “substitute” teachers;
• To support additional development projects in the community, ranging from teacher training in Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK) to working with the French NGO Hydrauliques sans Frontières to pipe water into the village from surrounding hill springs;

• To expand knowledge of the Nuosu and their situation within China to a broader audience.

The Board continues as an all-volunteer group, meeting several times a year, annually electing officers (president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer); voting on funding levels for scholarships and on new members of the Board; and discussing further plans and ideas for development.

Since its inception, CMEF has given over 500 scholarships and prizes to middle- and high-school students, supplemented between four and eight “substitute” teachers’ salaries per year for six years, paid supplemental salaries for teachers instructing cram courses for 6th graders planning to take middle-school exams, conducted two teaching workshops on traditional knowledge and elementary education, and most recently subsidized the 2010 re-establishment of the kindergarten that had been abolished in 2006. Nevertheless, getting CMEF going and keeping it going has presented a series of challenges, especially for part-time volunteers with no paid staff, a situation that Tierney and Steele (2011) describe as common for NGOs trying to operate on lean budgets. The remainder of this article discusses the challenges of an organization that needs to retain and renew its connections with its two separate constituencies, the two arms of the NGO pivot. The first arm consists of the beneficiaries of our philanthropy, the Yangjuan Primary School, and the people of the surrounding villages; if we lost touch with their needs, desires, and feelings, our organization would be meaningless. The second arm of the pivot includes our donors and volunteers; if we lost touch with their needs, desires, and feelings, our organization would be powerless.
Maintaining connections with the communities and organizations we serve

Staying relevant for the local Nuosu community presents a challenge for two reasons. First, our aspirations and educational philosophies differ from those of other stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and other outsiders who also try to help the community. As mentioned above, our original plans envisioned the school as a community center that could become more than just a conduit leading local children to more advanced schooling. This goal overlooked the realities of the Chinese school system and did not sufficiently consider village parents’ expectations that their children use out-of-class time to help with household and agricultural labor. Although various enrichment programs continue, and although many local people say that the mere presence of outsiders has enlarged their outlook on the world, the school is mainly about getting good grades, high test scores, and admission to middle and high schools. In response to this lesson in realism, we have had to adjust our message to donors, who, fortunately for us, seem relatively unconcerned. But if we had continued with what now seem like utopian original plans, we would have lost the ability to serve as an effective relay between donors and beneficiaries.

Second, the needs of educational programs in rural China change rapidly with China’s economic development and with shifts in governmental policies. Our experience in two specific areas—scholarship programs and teacher salary supplements—will illustrate recent changes in the educational and economic conditions in our part of rural China, and our attempts to keep up with these changes.

Scholarship Programs
When the Yangjuan School opened, some families were so poor that they could not afford the 50 RMB per semester fee\(^\text{10}\) that the School charged for tuition and books, even though subsidies from foreign and domestic supporters allowed the school to set this fee at only half the amount charged at nearby Baiwu School. Already by that time, nine years of education were supposed to be free and compulsory, and Yangjuan did in fact achieve an increase from 26% to 82% of the elementary age (6-13 years old) children attending school.\(^\text{11}\) Most people managed to afford the fees. But in 2004, the Ministry of Education issued new textbooks, replacing the cheap, small, black-and-white newsprint editions with large-format, full-color glossy editions. Since the policy of ‘two waivers and one supplement’ (\textit{liang mian yi bu})\(^\text{12}\) had not yet been implemented in Yanyuan County, to cover the cost of these new textbooks the school raised the fees to 80 RMB per semester, occasioning grumbling among parents. But in autumn 2007, Harrell witnessed the policy change trickling down to the Yangjuan Primary School: when the principal and a teacher hired a car to take them to the county seat to buy the new textbooks, they came back excitedly announcing that the books were now free. This change substantially reduced schooling costs passed on to families.

Similar changes in educational policy and practice happen often, and usually affect our scholarship programs. We have grown from 27 scholarships in 2005 to over 160 in 2010, as

\(^{10}\) At the time the school opened, the exchange rate was approximately 8.1 RMB to the US dollar, making the semester tuition about $6. But foreign exchange rates rarely reflect the buying power of the respective currencies. The average yearly cash income of families at that time was about 1500RMB, but the poorest families earned only about 500 RMB.

\(^{11}\) Chan and Harrell (2009) point out that the school consolidation policy has significantly affected attendance rates in mountainous areas of Yanyuan County. “In Baiwu Township villages located farther than five kilometers away from a key point or a multi-year village school, the average percent of primary school students within the population is about 5%. Villages located near either a key-point or a multi-year village primary school have on average 20% of primary students within the population.” The 4 villages served by the Yangjuan Primary School have 300 primary school students out of a total of 900 residents, or 33% (Chan and Harrell 2009). Thus our support of the school seems to have reversed the trend of decreased attendance in areas without schools nearby.

\(^{12}\) This policy, promulgated in 2004, mandates that in poor rural areas, schools should waive tuition and schoolbook fees (two waivers), and they should provide monthly subsistence stipends for their students (one subsidy). As nationally decreed policies often do, it took some time for it to reach Yangjuan. See Guo 2008 for an overview and analysis of this policy.
Yangjuan graduates have worked their way through the system up to and including the final year of high school. Many drop out, of course, but some remain; 15 of the 34 students in the first graduating class of 2005 were still in school in 2011 at the 12th-grade level, and all tested into either a three-year or four-year college program beginning in autumn 2011. We have lowered the size of our middle school scholarships since the policy of ‘two waivers and one supplement’ began to be implemented in the middle schools around Liangshan. But high school, which is not yet compulsory, remains competitive and costly; more and more graduates qualify and desire to attend high school. The CMEF Board thus decided to discontinue middle-school awards beginning in academic year 2010-2011, and predicted that this decision would not affect middle school attendance. We would offer substantial support to all high school students, and we would reserve some funds for when the first Yangjuan Primary School graduates enter college in 2011. But this decision met with local resistance when we were preparing to award scholarships in August, 2010. Teachers and local people felt that it was symbolically important to reward elementary graduates going on to middle school, even with a small amount that would not greatly affect their families’ budgets. So we ended up giving token prizes to middle school students in addition to the more substantial awards for high school.

Substitute Teachers

*Daike* or “substitute” teachers have comprised anywhere from a third to two-thirds of teachers at the school over the years. Substitute teachers are hired directly by the school with no input from the county educational authorities, and there are no formal credentials required. Almost all of the substitute teachers have been members or affines of Ma Erzi’s Mgebbu clan, which traditionally has been politically and economically dominant in Yangjuan; none has ever come from the former serfs and slaves of the Mgebbu clan, from its rival village of Pianshui, or from Pianshui’s satellite at Zhuchang. At the school’s inception, they were paid a mere 150 RMB per month, consistent with other *daike* teacher salaries in the region. While this was
nowhere near a living wage, they all lived with their families, and did not need to pay for lodging. On the other hand, they all helped their families with farming work in addition to their teaching duties, meaning that they received the least pay for the most work among the school staff.

Originally there was a school advisory board, consisting of Ma Erzi, Li Xingxing, Ma Erzi’s nephew and county official Ma Wei’er (Mgebbu Vilhy), and Benoît Vermander. The board was disbanded in 2004 amidst murmurs that trouble might be brewing because foreigners were interfering formally in China’s national project of education. Former board members continued to meet informally, and with the school depending on money provided by outsiders (after 2005 including CMEF) to pay substitute teachers’ salaries, former board members continued to give input regarding how much and under what conditions the substitute teachers would be paid. Gradually, the County Education Office began allocating some money toward substitute teachers’ pay, but it was never sufficient. As the subsidies rose, so did living costs, and CMEF continued to raise the salary, until in 2008 the 300 yuan per month from the government was being supplemented by 300 yuan from CMEF. Combined, these funding sources made the substitute teachers’ salaries only about half what was paid to the regular teachers, occasioning at least one substitute teacher going to Shanghai and working in a gasket factory rather than labor as a teacher for low pay (he returned to teach in 2010).

The quality of instruction given by substitute teachers varied greatly. This weakness led to a crisis during the 2008-2009 school year, when there were clear statistical differences between the test scores of students taught by regular and by substitute teachers. Every year, the test scores of each teacher’s classes are ranked among about 30 classes in the same subject at the same grade level in different schools in Baiwu and neighboring townships. For the 2008-09 year, all classes taught by regular teachers ranked in the top 5 out of 30, but classes taught by the substitute teachers ranked from 6 to 29. In November 2009 the principal, worried that the substitute teachers were not taking their responsibilities seriously, proposed a
meeting with all the teachers (also attended by Li Xingxing and Stevan Harrell) to address the question. Before the meeting, he drew up a proposal to establish a strict system of rewards and punishments, making the pay of the substitute teachers dependent on where their students’ test scores ranked among the classes in the district, and mandating dismissal for any teacher whose students’ scores fell in the bottom sextile.

Li and Harrell were very uncomfortable with this proposal and expressed reservations, but the principal did not agree to changes before convening the meeting. He began the meeting with a stern recitation of the poor record of the substitute teachers and asked for comments. As the principal is a rather autocratic administrator and is seen as arbitrary by many of the teachers, they were afraid to say anything. But finally a long-term 2nd-grade substitute teacher, who had repeatedly failed his credential exam by only a few points, spoke up. He stated that the problem was that the students coming into the lower grades were getting younger, more ill-prepared, and thus harder to teach every year. The teacher wondered if the solution were to be found not in punitive sanctions for teachers, but in improving the preparation of the youngest students. He proposed that the school re-instate the pre-primary class (学前班 xueqianban), which had been abolished around 2005.

Remarkably, every teacher in the room, regular and substitute, affirmed his analysis and spoke out in favor of the kindergarten proposal. Harrell and Li decided immediately to commit personal and CMEF funds to the kindergarten, and to affirm their commitment to a uniform pay standard for substitute teachers. Harrell took up a collection at a dinner for ecological researchers in Chengdu, Li deposited the money in the account he maintains for CMEF, and the kindergarten began again with 35 students in the fall of 2010. The teacher who made the original suggestion was elected in December 2010 as village head of the administrative village that includes the four villages in the school catchment area, plus two others near Baiwu town.
This demonstrates that flexibility in situations that cannot wait for board meetings or careful overseas discussions is necessary to keep CMEF and its activities up-to-date and relevant.

**Maintaining connections with our donors and volunteers**

The other arm of our pivot function is the connection between us and the sources of funds that allow us to carry on our work. Interacting with our donors brings the role of the Internet and other electronic media into focus. While technology has made physical distance much less important, with NGOs now able to base their operations at transoceanic distances from their causes, the very convenience of the Internet and other media poses new communication problems. Successful use of electronic media requires expertise on the part of the NGO which it may not possess and may not be able to afford—what Natalie Fenton (2009) calls “the tyranny of technology.” It also explicitly calls for the analysis of the target audience— for whom are these media formats intended? Is the target audience the community on whose behalf the NGO is working, or the people that the NGO wishes to educate and to solicit for funds?

In our case, without the Internet CMEF would be impossible—our all-volunteer workforce simply would not have time to send out the hundreds of letters or make the thousands of phone calls necessary to raise the funds we need. However, electronic media pose a temptation and a danger: we must tailor our communications with donors to our own abilities and time constraints, and avoid over-extension. And we must always be mindful that the message for the donors must interpret the happenings in the Valley in a way that is both truthful and understandable to those who have no experience whatsoever in a poor country or a remote village, let alone in this particular corner of Southwest China.
Fundraising: How Calendars Led to the Use of Electronic Media

Calendar sales and donations given in response to solicitations for calendar sales remain the foundation of CMEF fundraising. When we first began to sell calendars in the late fall of 2004, we relied solely upon personal connections with colleagues, family and friends for support. Using email as the primary method of communication, we sold about a hundred calendars and raised around $3000. After incorporating as a non-profit, we slowly gained in sophistication—creating a website at the time the group was incorporated, advertising our calendars on the website in 2005, with thorough updates in 2008 and again in early 2012, creating an option to purchase through Amazon.com in 2007 and through PayPal in 2008, and building a Facebook presence in 2009.

However, personal connections continue to be the key method of contacting people, both long-term supporters whose steady contributions range from a few thousand dollars to those faithfully purchasing a single calendar every year, and new supporters who hear about the CMEF through personal conversations, word-of mouth, or social networking on sites such as Facebook. The majority of people selling calendars are either current or former Board members, thus leading to a situation where each person’s contribution is keenly felt, and those who sell large numbers of calendars need assistance to ship them. This has led to a kind of shy-brazen internal dialogue within each of us; we know we have to get out there and importune our friends and supporters, but we feel uncomfortable doing so, and particularly about approaching people a second time. It is not something academics are accustomed to doing in the arcane world of academic courtesy. It is noteworthy perhaps that the businesswomen on our board have felt less apprehensive, frequently urging the rest of us to be more aggressive promoters of the cause.
Due to the risks inherent in depending on a once-a-year fundraising plan, and always looking to increase our revenue as our scholarship recipients proceed through the middle and high school system, in 2009 the Board experimented with an online auction of Nuosu Yi crafts—the Nuosu are well known for their embroidery, silver-smithing, and red, black and yellow lacquerware (Harrell, Bamo, and Ma 2000). Grub purchased a large collection of items during her research in Liangshan, with the original idea of having a traditional silent auction in Seattle to raise funds for CMEF. When it became evident that the logistics of organizing an event would be too much for an all-volunteer group and that neither attendance nor bids were guaranteed, we decided to try an online auction with Facebook as the venue, as most of the Board already had Facebook profiles. We created a Facebook group called Cool Mountain Education Fund, and asked Board members to send invitations to their friend lists and post teasers on their status reports. The auction lasted for one week, raised over $500, and resulted in a Facebook group of 46 people. We then took the remaining items and placed them in a section of the CMEF website called the Nuosu Marketplace, where they are available for purchase through PayPal. The items themselves are stored at the home of a Board member who is also in charge of shipping. Sales are slow but steady on the Nuosu Marketplace, with the result that we have been able to track what sells well (embroidered bags, silver earrings, large elevated bowls, small covered containers) and what does not (wine sets, embroidered cloths, and clothing). Working with Facebook showed us that there is another easy social networking function called Facebook Causes that would allow us to solicit directly for donations on Facebook using PayPal. A Board member created a “cause,” also called Cool Mountain Education Fund; in February, 2011 there were 128 members. In the first year, the cause raised a paltry $219, but then a birthday appeal in August 2010 raised over $900, making the effort

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13 That Harrell, 61 years old at the time, was the one board member who was not yet on Facebook illustrates a generational aspect of the digital divide. (Other board members varied in the extent of their Facebook usage as well.)
seem perhaps worth the trouble. Additional small-scale media coverage comes from Board members who mention CMEF activities on personal blogs and other social networking sites.

Effectiveness of Our Methods of Using Media: The Tyranny of Technology?

(Insert Table 1: Opportunities and challenges of social media for the Cool Mountain Education Fund)

As mentioned previously, the CMEF is mostly made up of academics (students and professors) and is a relatively young all-volunteer organization. The founding members had little or no previous experience serving on the board of an NGO or non-profit organization. It has been difficult to maintain a sufficient level of involvement. Perhaps the most precious commodity in today’s world is time; both connection with the beneficiary community and electronic communication with the donors require effort, yet the Board’s ability to devote the needed time and energy to promote CMEF’s goals fluctuates with school and work schedules. It is noteworthy that of all the board members who have served since the inception of CMEF, only three visited Yangjuan between 2008 and 2010. On the donor side, media have great potential for reaching vast audiences, but only with sufficient effort. CMEF has a seasonal spike in receipts because of calendar sales in the late autumn and has also done well in other instances of focused attention for a short time span, as the online Facebook auction and some of the Facebook “birthday wishes” demonstrated. However, the buzz around the online auction quickly faded once the items were moved to the Nuosu Marketplace on the CMEF website. What we have found with both the Facebook CMEF group and cause is that they are most effective when multiple participants use them regularly. If the Board or other members do not use the Facebook

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14 CMEF does not provide funding for these trips, which are usually financed through a mix of related research project funding and personal funds. Board members may consider this expense another form of support for the CMEF.
applications regularly, posting updates and reminders to keep enthusiasm high, members lose interest.

While tools such as Twitter and YouTube might be effective in keeping members updated and interested, they would entail engaging regularly with the technology and maintaining a steady level of activity—fundraising, interacting with Yangjuan villagers, and developing other items of interest. Regular updates from the ‘field’, in the form of blogs from undergraduates currently engaged in research, might help sustain interest, but these are made difficult due to the irregularity of visits and the barriers erected by the Chinese government on blogging.

Given that time and funds are so limited to the CMEF, as is common for small NGOs, additional expansion in communications with both arms of the pivot must be carefully assessed for its strategic value. One discussed plan is to expand the CMEF website beyond the English-only audience. Translating the website into Chinese would take time and expertise, as well as discussion by the Board as to the ultimate purpose of the translation. As Bill Anderson phrases it, “the three questions to ask before adopting a new tool: 1.) what problem will it solve?, 2.) whose problem is it?, and 3.) what new problems are likely to arise by adopting it?” (White 2009). Would the translation increase access to fundraising in China and, potentially, Taiwan? Would it promote awareness of the Nuosu and their situation, as exemplified by the students of the Yangjuan Primary School? Or would it simply allow the people of Yangjuan and other Nuosu who have access to the Internet additional knowledge of CMEF activities carried out on their behalf, and perhaps give them a greater voice?

Once adopted, are there potential problems that a Chinese language website could cause—such as the need for a native speaker to edit, difficulty finding time to update, limited exposure from choice of characters used (traditional characters that would reach Taiwan and
members of the diaspora, or simplified characters accessible to mainland Chinese readers, or both, which would significantly increase the time required to maintain the site? Could there be political repercussions from the Chinese government concerned with our activities in the village? All these questions must be discussed in light of the restrictions on the CMEF’s ability to answer.

Running a Non-Profit as a Hobby

There is a wealth—some might say an overload—of information available on the Internet with tips for starting an NGO, for those who have the time to read and absorb the lessons offered. They emphasize the importance of acknowledging the amount of time that is necessary to devote to the success of an NGO or non-profit, with one resource offered by the Georgia Center for Nonprofits stating, “running a non-profit is not a hobby” (Georgia Center for Nonprofits, n.d.). They also emphasize the need for a well-balanced Board, one whose members offer a variety of skills and strengths. While this advice may have originally been designed for nonprofits with more traditional methods of fundraising, targeting a wide variety of networks, the advice also mentions practical skills such as accounting, general business practices, and increasingly, skill with communications technology. Many sites also recommend that young NGOs seek out professional training and assistance in areas in which their Board may be weak. Interestingly, the general recommendation is to see running an NGO or non-profit much like a business—having a robust plan for funding and expenditures, attracting a variety of talent to ensure effective execution, and annually assessing the state of the organization with recommendations for change. But we are still running CMEF, for better or worse, as a hobby.

Conclusion
Anthropologists have long been concerned with their effects on people and communities in which they work. While the early days of pretending we can be flies on a wall without changing anyone’s behavior when we are around are long over (cf. Barley 2000, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Lassiter 2001, Metcalf 2002, Srivinas et al. 2002), many anthropologists continue to be concerned about effecting change beyond contributing to the ever-growing cacophony of scholarly publications (cf. The Royal Academy 2011). In carrying out our work with CMEF, fears of being associated with neocolonial politics through development projects (Escobar 1995, Murdock 2003) have caused us pause, and worries of creating unwelcome attention toward our village partners from the more repressive elements of the Chinese state have also concerned us. We have struggled through many layers of power dynamics, often hidden, in our relationships with villagers, with school personnel, and with one another.

The boundaries between research relationships and the functions of the CMEF are not always clear—in fact, most scholarship ceremonies and meetings with the school take place during the same week that undergraduates supervised by Harrell are developing new village-based research projects—and we realize that gratitude for scholarship assistance may compel some villagers to participate, or participate more enthusiastically, in these research studies. But in the end, while we have pondered these concerns and agonized over their implications, we have moved beyond the paralysis of inaction. Ever conscious of over-stepping our bounds, we have proceeded cautiously: we have not expanded beyond the initial village area, in part because we lack personal connections outside that area and in part because we fear over-stretching our organizational capacity, including our ability to fund an expansion.

We offer this analysis of our activities in part to begin a conversation about the intertwined role of research and activism. This portrait of the complicated interactions and communication challenges that such organizations encounter on both sides of the Pacific may help unravel some of the questions that engaged scholars face. As the development of NGOs
and grassroots organizations in China continues to attract scholarly attention, we hope that additional studies will join ours in discussing this complicated series of engagements.
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