



Overseas Community Service Project Reflection Report

Project Xing Fu III
Yang Zhai Village, Kunming
Yunnan, China
7th – 20th December 2013

Done By
Singapore Management University

PROJECT XING FU 3: SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

REFLECTION #1: MUHAMAD HILMI BIN HARRIS



Picture: One of the enthusiastic village kids. Always ever-ready for a photo.

I would have never imagined myself to be in a foreign land with a group of people I barely knew and coming back from all that to see life in a whole new perspective. I live by a famous saying, “Two roads diverged in a wood – and I took the one less traveled by. And it has made all the difference.” Indeed it has.

Embarking to Yang Tzai, China, was such a humbling experience. Within the short 10 days spent in the village, I learnt how to be more grateful, more giving, more caring and more positive. This community service project is very dear to me because it was also my first time leading a relatively big group without much supervision from the school authorities

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to a foreign land. I felt that I needed to play a huge role in ensuring everyone is taken care of and to make sure that the program runs smoothly amongst many other things. I am also blessed to have a very cooperative and hardworking co-leader.

This trip is definitely something I will remember for a very long time and if given an opportunity, I would love to revisit and offer my assistance once again. It is also without question that all this wouldn't be possible with all the help from the different organisations, school, family, friends and especially our liaison officer Miss Mariah Mah. We were tested with many things such as battling with the cold weather, sleeping & eating in unfamiliar conditions and circumstances. I will also never forget the huge test of patience on us when we got stuck in the cold in a traffic jam that lasted for more than 24hours.

Overall, I believe we achieve what we came to do here collectively as a group. We also manage to forge good relations with the villagers, kids and teachers. Since I visited the site in August 2013 before we came back here again in December 2013, there was a tremendous amount of change and I was very excited and really happy for them. My hope is to make this project a sustainable one and continue to contribute to the village and other parts of China that needs help. InshaAllah each year there will be a new batch that will continue embarking on this project and work closely with Miss Mariah Mah.

In conclusion, without Allah, I am nothing and Allah is everything. If we open your hearts and eyes wide enough, we will see that Allah's gifts and mercy is limitless. That was how I felt throughout the journey. May Allah bless the people in China and keep them safe always.

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REFLECTION #2: NUR YUHANIS YASIN



Picture: Group picture with the teachers from Al-Fattah preschool.

I took a while, thinking of how I would like to begin reflecting on my journey to rural China. Then I decided to start from nowhere else but, the very beginning.

The time was 1am, Singapore time and I was standing frozen at the airport in the middle of a group of Malays – many of whom I could barely put a name to their faces. At that point, I could think of all the worries in the world. I was going to miss my family, I was going to suffer in the cold (it was expected to reach 0 degrees Celsius at its lowest), I would have no say in the food I would be served, I would not be able to run away from the xenophobia we all face in Singapore and I was so sure I would not survive, what more have fun, with this group of people for the next 14 days. My plan was to keep to myself, do what is required, clear my hours and get back to Singapore in one piece. Call me cynical, but yes, that was my personal standing back then.

There were many things we all needed to accustom ourselves to as soon as we arrived. First, it was inevitably the language barrier. Many China natives are only able to speak

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mandarin, added onto their already thick accent. In that aspect, I would count myself rather lucky as I was able to understand and converse in basic Mandarin. It was rather fun being a translator when our Chinese friends were not around. I tried my best but for all you know, I was passing on the wrong message. But hey, we survived.

Secondly, the eccentric weather was out to make its presence felt. As soon as we arrived, we had to put on additional layers. Initially, it was rather refreshing as we were experiencing a totally new season – one in which we would never get to experience in Singapore where it is either sunny or rainy. Venturing further into rural China, the weather definitely started getting colder especially when we got to the village, high up in the mountains. For the next week, the weather continued to test our tolerance as the temperature gets to its lowest of -9 degrees Celsius. We were living in a freezer. By then, most of us were missing good old sunny Singapore.

What really got to me was the stark difference in living conditions of the villagers in the mountains. The roads were uneven (to a point it could have possibly been unsafe), the sewage system was old – making the toilets rather dirty and unhygienic, the water supply was from a water tank up on the roof, and the nearest provision shop was a two hour ride away.

All that said, there was more good that came out of it than bad. The crazy weather made us closer. We started taking care of each other and paying attention to whoever was having frostbites, whom among us needed an additional heat pack, and who was falling sick under the weather. Slowly, we started take notice of the habits of our peers – who among us, without fail, would need to clear their bowels daily, who among us needs at least three servings of rice at meal times and of course, who snores at lights out.

There were many incidents that occurred, out to test each and every one of us. The water in the tank froze up, leaving us with no source of water over two occasions. A wild dog bit one of us. The altitude became too overwhelming for some of us. The ever changing

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programs, having to adapt to the needs of the villagers. And who would forget, our 27-hour bus ride.

In the end, this trip gives us nothing but one hell of a story to tell and only good memories to keep. The two 21st birthdays we celebrated with nothing short but a two-tiered cake, the many bus rides, our meal times and the many heart-to-heart conversations before sleep. I strongly believe that at the end, we gained more than we could possibly give to the villagers. I came back, a more open-minded me. Turn back time, and I would still choose to go on this trip. With the exact same group of people.

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REFLECTION #3: SITI MARIAM BINTE JUMSADI



Picture: A Panoramic View of Village in Yangtzai

As cliché as it sounds, our trip to China for the community service program was a really eye-opening one. As far as what I have seen and feel for myself, my preconceived notions about China and its people changed after the two weeks spent there. The journey began the moment we touched down, and proceeded to travel to the countryside. Even though it was nighttime when we finally arrive at our destined location, we were given a warm welcome by a group of villagers.

Over the following ten days, we spent most of our time with various activities. We painted a couple of rooms in the kindergarten as well as the exterior of the first level of the building. Most of us had the opportunity to express the “artist” in us especially with the painting of the decorations around the room! Eventually, at the end of it all, we hope our paintings can make the children happy. It was also heart-warming to see the children come to school despite having to squeeze in the small transport vehicles. Seeing them doing their daily “dance” routines also made us motivated to give our best. Further, besides the kindergarten, we also spent time cleaning the mosque and surrounding area.

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Being in the programs team, along with several others, I had the chance to interact more with the children during the hygiene and coloring lessons.

We also had the chance to experience a couple of house visits – one in the village, which, we stayed at, and the other at one of the poorest village in the country. I was very impressed with their hospitality and warmness to strangers despite our language barrier. At the second house, despite their poverty, the hosts shared with us their food like nuts and apples. Additionally, at the other village (where the second village is), it started to snow heavily and I had my virgin experience of playing with real snow (we had snowball fights!)

On the ninth day, we visited a famous madrasah (religious school) in China where Muslim students countrywide flock there to learn. The school has produced students who went on to study in prestigious institutions like the Al-Azhar University; all of which despite the lack of funds and poor living conditions. To keep our morale up, as the weather get colder and less comfortable, we had an angel-mortal system. We wrote anonymously to one another. After the ten days, we had to guess who our “angels” were.

Soon, our days in the village came to an end. We had an emotional farewell as we departed for the city. An unprecedented event occurred on our journey to the city we most of us experienced the longest traffic jam in our lives – it lasted for almost a day. Despite that, I felt that it was a blessing in disguise where we learnt about patience and endurance. The beautiful “gift” we got was that we saw the sun set and rise across the horizon, over the scenic land.

To sum up, there were many things that I learnt. First, to not take the daily things we do for granted: education, sanitation and living conditions. Second, happiness is a very important factor in life. All in all, I feel humbled by the experience I gained over the two weeks and hope to contribute more in the future.

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REFLECTION #4: NURUL ATIQA ROSLAN



Picture: View of Village in Yangtzai from Al-Fattah Learning Centre

Throughout our stay at Yangzhai village, I woke up to the landscape view of mountains, brick houses, rocky road and vast green field every morning. Almost every morning, I stood outside the room just to enjoy the beauty of this village despite the cold breeze. I've always admired postcards of mountains, and pictures on my Geography book, but now I'm able to see it myself with a 360° view. This serene view never failed to take my breath away and it was also that moment when I would reflect upon myself what I've achieved during this community service project.

Every morning, people from different walks of life walked through that bumpy road which links the villages to the town area. Children walking in groups heading to school, an old man walking with a donkey, an old woman carrying a basket full of vegetables, tractors transporting bricks and van filled with children. Everyone with their respective purpose, such as receiving education at school, earning income for the family or be a change to the village.

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When we first travelled this bumpy rocky road, it took the van around half an hour to arrive. I could not imagine how long they have walked and endure the pain walking with their worn out shoe to reach their school, home or workplace and they did it every day.

Initially I saw it as a daily routine for the people but upon reflections, I began to see the road as a path towards a goal. We might go through hurdles in life that would hinder us from reaching our goal but it is through those hurdles that you gain something. You will return from school learning a new subject or language or solve a problem. You will make mistakes at work but you learnt from it. You will meet people from different walks of life along the way and they might be someone who could help you or be a lesson to you. Nonetheless, you continue to walk that path and reach towards your goal.

It also reminds me of a verse from Al-Quran, “Verily with every hardship, there is relief”. This verse is painted on the wall of the school and it has become my motivation to be positive and continue to move forward despite the hardships. I hope it will be a motivation to the children and villagers too. Furthermore, this trip has taught me the meaning of appreciation and being thankful even for the small things. Performing our daily prayers with the villagers, eating dinner together and be a part of the community, it is heart-warming to see their smile at the end of the day. I’m thankful to be involved in this community service project and make a difference to the village.

Our team has worked hard together painting the classrooms, enduring the cold breeze to provide a better learning place for the children and be motivated to learn. At the end of the whole project, the sight of the children smiling while entering their new classrooms we painted and villagers having their meals in the warm kitchen built from the donations collected was heartening. Because of that, this is one of my reason that I’m driven to give back to the society. The valuable time spent at the village and opportunity to be part of this project is something I would not trade for. As this is my first overseas community service trip, it is the beginning of more adventures for me to embark on volunteering projects ☺

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REFLECTION #5: SYAHIDAH BINTE IBRAHIM



Picture: Village kids receiving their hygiene pack (toothbrush & toothpaste)

Two takeaways from the trip: Gratitude & Patience.

It was a bumpy journey from Kunming airport to the village. Nevertheless, we enjoyed the view throughout the journey and tried some of the local food. We arrived late at night, and it was very heart-warming to be greeted by the villagers despite the cold night. The scenery around the village was breathtaking.

Throughout our stay at the village we did some cleaning; scrubbing the walls, sweeping and cleaning up the prayer place in the mosque. We also painted the classrooms as well as the front walls. It was indeed a blessing to be able to stay beside a mosque, which gave us a timely reminder of our duty as a Muslim to pray on time and remembering God always throughout our stay there.

Seeing the children and families at Yang Zhai village taught me the meaning of contentment, and how fortunate and blessed we are living in Singapore. I am ashamed of myself for my attitude at times of wanting more and taking advantages the small little

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things that are definitely appreciated if given to the people in this village. The photo above was when the children received their very own toothbrush and toothpaste. All of them were so happy having to learn how to brush their teeth and getting their own dental kit. Their attitude towards new things around them is worthy to take after. When was the last time have we honestly be thankful over a small thing we bought for example, the toothpaste itself? We tend to waste the toothpaste; over-using it instead of a pea size drop. Or face it, probably some of us might be lazy to even brush of our teeth. However, some of the children there probably doesn't even know how to brush their teeth, or doesn't know a toothbrush and toothpaste exists. How often do we reflect on wasting small the things in our home, and have we ever thought of reducing it thus avoiding wastage? For example, it has helped to remind myself not to waste water unnecessarily. When washing the rice, I would water the plants using the used water. It is actually something I knew and learnt before, but I didn't practice it. After the trip, I make it a habit to water the plants using the used water from washing rice to avoid wastage.

Throughout the trip, we experienced unexpected events such as the long traffic jam and being stuck in it for very long hours. However, it has taught us patience, and to look at the good side of it, such as enjoy the surroundings; beautiful mountains and snow. For all we know, probably things could have got worse than that. Having to experience such events in China, has taught me to be more appreciative and patience over slight issues in Singapore, such as a minor traffic jam, as we have gone through a much worse experience there.

It was peaceful and simple staying at the village, something that we can never experience in Singapore now. Our life is engulfed in running after the world, thus we tend to ignore and appreciate the small little things around us. Being in this worldly rat race, time passes by quickly around us. I'm blessed for the opportunity given to help the community there and at the same time, being able to see His beautiful creations. It's an experience I'll never forget and a trip of many firsts.

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I'm sure that the trip has helped all of us to rediscover ourselves and brings us closer to God in different ways. Friendship is also forged when we are there, not only among ourselves, but also with the villagers and people whom we met there.

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REFLECTION #6: PANG JIAMIN



Picture: Village kids receiving their hygiene pack (toothbrush & toothpaste)

I always heard people say that children have the clearest eyes and purest heart. Before I joined this OCSP I never really spend long time with children. They are lovely, energetic. This photo was taken during an in class activity with local kindergarten. We taught them how to brush their teeth. I'm glad that our activity really helps them and it will benefit their whole life.

I wasn't so close to poverty. In my mind poverty is children with big stomach and starving. But after this trip I realize poverty is more than that. This kindergarten is built by Singapore XiJi organization. We provided all necessary stuff for those children. For example, they are provided with tissues in every classroom. It was in winter and almost every children running nose. They were actually running everywhere with mucus. They didn't have the conscious to wipe their nose. Some volunteers helped them to wipe and taught them. I was thinking if their parents never teach them all this basic then education is the only way to improve their living standard. The problem is not they are poor. The problem is they don't know what is poor. Not only lack of money is poor. They can have

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better life with their current economic condition if they know how to utilize everything. Therefore we all have the responsibility to help them and benefit generation to generation.

As an international student this time I went back my own country I saw some friends do have some misunderstanding of my country. They did respect and try to find out more truth about this land. I was helping them to communicate with local people. I learnt that even we speak different language, even we are different races we do share the same believe. The humanity, the love and the care are the most valuable things we need to inherit. Our school gives us this opportunity to experience the real situation where people need help where we can provide help. In the future, we will all go to work and contribute the society. But there's another way to contribute to the society by helping others.

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REFLECTION #7: LEE QIAN HUEY



Picture: School's playground where children gather to play during breaks

These schooling children were below the age of seven, with the youngest being three years old. And despite their tender age, they were extremely obedient and disciplined. Whenever the teachers wanted them to get in line, they will do so quickly and quietly. But what amazed me and left a deep impression on me till now were their sensibility and determination.

I remember being instructed to pick up any trash seen in the school compound with a tong. At that time, the children were playing in the playground. And amongst the children who were playing, a five years old boy came forward to offer his assistance. I declined but he grabbed the tongs I was holding and started gathering his friends to pick up any rubbish. After a while, his friends gave up picking the trash and went back to the playground to play, but that boy continued to pick up trash. His actions deeply heartened me because at such a young tender age, he was sensible enough to help my friends and I with the picking up of the trash. And he reasoned that it was his school so he wanted to help. What he said couldn't help but put a smile on my face.

I understand that the school that we went to is the only school in the village. For some of the children to get to the school, they had to walk long distances while bracing the cold.

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Additionally, they did not seem to be adequately clothed. This reminded me of the days when I chose not to go to school because I was 'sick'. Yet on the other hand, the cold did not seem to deter these children from going to school, portraying their determination to come to school and get an education.

During my short stint at the school, I was not only amazed but got reminded of the little things in life that I seem to have forgotten. And that is to count my blessings for what I own and to enjoy the moment.

There was once when a few of my group members gave out sweets they brought for the children. Their initial reaction shocked me because they were so eager to grab one each, and there were instances when the stronger ones tried to grab the sweets given to other children. This was unlike the typical reaction I would have gotten from nonchalant Singaporean children who were less unconcerned whether they got a sweet or not. And it struck me that sweets were uncommon in that rural part of China. That reminded me to count my blessings to be able to possess something because something unimportant to me could be so important to someone else.

In another scenario, the school had no heater, which meant that I had to boil my own water and then carry the thermal flasks into the bathroom with me. This was a stark contrast with what I had to do in Singapore, which was to simply on the heater and use whatever amount I wanted. As I had to carry the thermal flasks into the bathroom, warm water was limited to what I brought inside the bathroom with me. Definitely, this was a great reminder to count my blessings for what I own.

In addition, while in China, I had a break from the shackles of technology and was given a chance to enjoy the moment without being distracted by technological gadgets. In Singapore, I often see many people using phones during meals (I am guilty of this too), which compromised the quantity of conversations people could have over meals. But over in China, as my friends and I could do limited things with our phones, we interacted a

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lot more over meals and came to know of the dietary habits of some people. And ever since then, I tried to make an effort to not check my phone over meals just so that I can enjoy my meals a little better. That said, I am thankful for caring friends who were always on the lookout for each other.

I remember someone in my group falling sick and everyone were always on the lookout for her, making sure that she was well and good. At times when she was not well enough to come down to the canteen to have breakfast/lunch/dinner with us, there will always be someone remembering to bring food back for her. This was extremely heartening because in a foreign country, friends who were always on the lookout for one each were important. In my case, I had to borrow moisturizer from my friends countless of times because I forgot to bring them. Most hearteningly, they always gave some to mine on a daily basis. A simple gesture, yet it goes a long way.

On another note, because this trip was a trip to a Muslim region, many of my group members were Muslims. I was amongst the three Chinese girls to be there. As the locals there only spoke Chinese, I was the few main point of contact between my non-Chinese speaking friends and the locals. Since I do not speak Chinese at home, my Chinese vocabulary is limited by what I remember from school. Inevitably, there were times when I tried to communicate with the locals but ended up wrongly translating for my friends. In the end, I always asked my Buddy, who spoke better Chinese than me, for a double confirmation lest I err again. Though so, I am always thankful for my friends who seem understanding towards me on this aspect.

On the whole, the trip was fulfilling and it was an eye opening experience to see for myself what was it like to live in a village. And at the same time, be reminded of the simple things that I have always taken for granted.

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REFLECTION #8: HAFEEZ GHADAFFI



Seated down at the airport, I was thinking to myself how I was going to communicate to my Chinese brothers and sisters in China while I am not able to speak their language. This thought has been lingering in my heart for many days prior to this day of departure. It did not help that much that only 2 of my 20+ other members were able to speak mandarin. Nevertheless, I made dua and hope that everything would be fine inshaa Allah. I was not worried about my new friends from SMU which I was going to be with for the next few weeks. I had resolved to protect them (a funny resolution, to you who read this I am sure) and I wanted to reach heart to heart as best as I could to everyone whom I meet.

Landing at the airport in China, though it seemed modern somewhat, I noticed that it was almost different than in Singapore: where I got the impression that this country to be too orderly and strict – particularly from their immigration officers working on duty. There was still signs of communist China here and there, although the first shop I learned about was Starbucks being one of the places we should go while we wait for the bus to arrive. Also, the air too did not seem particularly clean: it was dusty and I knew for certain that it was not from the desert like terrain. However, the area was cleaner than I expected.

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The place was cold but it was not so bad to freeze someone to death. We spent many hours trying to get to our intended village... What I saw on the way there was actually shocking, in a way. One being that a small little boy simply took down his pants and began doing his business into a drain right in front of his house. There was no attempt by that child to clean his bottom afterwards whatsoever. Clearly, hygiene was wanting on their part and toilet facilities were inadequate...or was it their culture? They were not a well to do people as well for I saw their houses were made of bricks and layered with mud.

Once we reached our village, it was late at night. What struck me was how almost the whole village turned up to welcome us (it was pretty late mind you and I later learned they usually slept quite early as it was cold and the howling wind was very chilling). I got to know that they waited for us there for quite a while. What struck me first though was that all were almost elderly man and woman. Hardly were there any people of working age... After their welcome and us carrying our bags to our rooms (with their gracious help of course) we began to sleep. Our room was small for a group of 8 and there was no water heater in this cold weather (temp was about below 10).

I later learned there was a “solar water heater” that hardly ever worked. I learned too that actually that this room was previously inhabited by workers who were doing construction on a building to extend its sections (to make it bigger). They were now living in that construction site itself which actually looks like a war torn building being rebuilt (because their construction work was sloppy compared to Singapore’s standard) The kindergarten teachers also lived in the same building on the lower floor as the workers did. They had no bed and their toilet was outside. I don’t think they bathed and it was so uncomfortable for them, I am sure, because they had to run to the toilet in the evenings from their rooms as they were not wearing tudung. They cannot be wearing tudung all the time but also could not afford to let the men see them right! Did I not mention too that the construction workers had some kind of bonfire in their “room” to cook meals and keep them warm? I can tell you that it was quite cold as the water tank on the roof had an icicle hanging from it the next day I woke up! What harsh conditions they had to live in...

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The next few days were wonderful where their hospitality was excellent. The central kitchen that was newly built served the cooks well and they kept giving us food, food and more food in the meals! When there were any signs or indication of shortage that if the food was lacking, they would cook more straight away (especially eggs) every time!

One of the main purpose of going there was to paint and decorate the classes and surrounding walls to improve the impoverished look of the building. What struck me was that they did not mind what we painted or how we painted it because we were there to help them! Many times I asked what their preference was: if they wanted it like this or that colour but their response was all the same – we the ones helping them and therefore we could do as we please. They kept smiling constantly each and every time too. I was touched by their hospitality and kindness – you hardly get this kind of attitude back in Singapore.

The kids were lovely. They were well mannered but one observation I made earlier was correct: they had poor toilet manners. Perhaps it was their culture. But oh dear, their faces were stained with soot, as were their jackets and bags. They must have only stoves at home to keep them warm at night back in their homes. I am sure they had no heaters. Their village looked poor too. Anyway, these kids in the morning would come in vans and these vans were full of them (you could say like sardines squeezed in a can) and all of them would be standing as there was really no place to sit. Hopefully, the school can procure more funds to purchase more vans so the children do not have to stand in these mini vans throughout their bumpy journey across villages on the dirt road...

As mentioned earlier, all the men I saw were old men. Hardly were there any young ones in sight – they must all be working in the cities. Every prayer time, these old men would walk up from their village and pray at the mosque (Ms Mah helped build) without fail. It was hard for me as I could not talk to them, making it almost impossible to establish a rapport that I felt was much needed in order for me to understand their situation better. Have I told you though, that this old men have a distinct smell? Their coat actually

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smelled of coal. Their hands were black with soot. I am not sure how hard they have worked their lives, but their skin were really (I am not sure how you describe it) “worn” with work. But they were farmers no?

One of the few days while staying at the village top, I was afforded the opportunity to go down to the village itself to visit in order to pass a few books to a girl, Ma Muh Nah (not sure how to spell her name). Jialin, one of my Chinese friends tagged along to help me translate. My old friend, Iskandar Lim, was actually here in the village 2 years ago and managed to interact and got to personally know the Chinese villagers as he himself was a Chinese and had converted to Islam. This girl I was about to pass the book to was actually the secondary 1 equivalent in our Singapore school education level, but her level of maturity was way beyond. She mentioned that she had to stay at her home and took care of her little sister because both her parents had to go to the clinic to send off their grandmother to the hospital. Oh my, her house was like a store room. The furniture were second hand and I was right...they used coal stoves in their own homes to warm themselves. She mentioned that life was not easy but they had to make do. She told me that her aspirations were to be a doctor and of course, I told her a few words of encouragement... I dearly hope her dreams come true. Truly, the odds may not really be with her. But perhaps I might be wrong.

We also visited a madrasah in one of the provinces after our stay in the village and I was left appalled. The place was not really clean as construction was going on. It was dusty and old. Even the teachers there expressed lament that conditions and facilities were unbecoming of a religious school but they are here to make best of what they have; and to learn and teach for the sake of God, one has to face many obstacles that must be overcome. What was actually really heart breaking was that the students there had smiles brighter than jewels, and their faces beamed with happiness when they saw us (I am not kidding). The girls though, despite their likeness of flowers under the precious night sky, were living in the basement of the school where the air was actually stuffy and unclean (as it was near the toilet). The conditions there were not necessarily easy but they were

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fighting with all their heart to remain positive in their outlook (as to what I felt) I later learned that some suffered rheumatism because of the unclean air and others were crying every night because they were far away from home and without a doubt, missing their family members. And here we are in Singapore taking school for granted while our chinese Muslim brethren were fighting emotional and physical battle to attain a higher spiritual station in the educational program.

I want to do a lot more things for them, but I do not have the financial means to do so.

One day, I hope I can do something for my community as well as for theirs.

May we never waver.

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REFLECTION #9: FARIQ BIN SAID



From the moment we stepped off the plane and on to the tarmac you could feel that we were going to be in for an unforgettable experience. The cold immediately bit into our skin and some of us asked ourselves how bad the cold was going to be if it wasn't even officially winter yet. I kept an open mind nevertheless.

Halfway through the bus ride towards the town near Yang Zhai and I realized that we were headed into a part of China not often seen by the rest of the world. We were far away from the bustling cities of Shanghai or Beijing and we were definitely not anywhere near other tourists from outside of China. We were surrounded by nature, villages and agriculture. It's a stark difference from city life, but there was this odd peacefulness in the air that almost made time stand still. As we moved through the countryside, I tried to take it all in as much as I could. It was a breath of fresh air to be away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

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The trip took longer than expected, but it gave us the opportunity to sample the local delicacies from the roadside stalls and the numerous bakeries around. Then it was onto the last leg of our ride to Yang Zhai Village. It never really hit me how far from the urban areas we'd be until that last stretch of road that led up to the village centre. Paved roads gave way to a dirt road with potholes every meter. As slowly as the van moved over the dirt road, we couldn't escape the violent throes that came over the van. I'm amazed that the tiny van held up under the weight of pretty much the 3 heaviest men on Project XingFu as it made its way across the dirt road.

At around 9pm, we finally reached our destination. As we exited our vans, the cold hit our skin again and it felt different than when we first exited the plane. We would come to recognize it as the cold associated to living in a village in the mountains during winter. We were greeted by some of the villagers and their smiles definitely made the cold a lot more bearable.

For the next 10 days, we set about doing what we had planned to do. We expected to have to help out with putting together the new kitchen, but to our surprise, the kitchen was already fully operational.

For the next 10 days, we set about doing what we had planned to do. We expected to have to help out with putting together the new kitchen, but to our surprise, the kitchen was already fully operational. It was already fully furnished and helped to feed the young kindergarteners during their school days.

We moved on to the next item on our agenda, which was sprucing up 2 newly-built classrooms and an exterior wall. I was put together with a team to handle the painting of the 2 new classrooms. I spent the first morning out buying paint and it dawned on me that the colors of paint that they had come in only basic colors. It caught me off-guard as I guess I had been too used to being able to buy paint in a wide spectrum of colors in Singapore. It wasn't an issue though. We came to Yang Zhai to paint classrooms and I made sure that those classrooms were painted.

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I soon learned that improvising was going to be commonplace as we set about doing our tasks. We improvised paint buckets and paint trays by using whatever that was available to us. I often found myself digging through the scraps from the construction that was going on nearby to aid the team in painting.

Despite being indoors, the cold inevitably started to get to us. And given the fact that the number of paint brushes and rollers was quite limited, the team naturally started to rotate themselves. I decided to spend majority of my time on painting the rooms. I realized that the moment I got too static, my knees and collarbone would ache from the cold. So I kept myself in and around the classrooms even when I had to rest.

After a couple of days, we all started to settle into the daily routine of breakfast – work – lunch – work – dinner – sleep. I found it quite accomplishing and therapeutic. The routine was starkly different from what happens in Singapore but I found it so much more fulfilling. Essentially, we traded a hard day's worth of work for 3 hot meals a day and a mattress to sleep on at night. At times, I miss the simplicity of the routine now that we're back in Singapore. Knowing that the hard work we put in had an immediate impact on the lives of these people that we could barely communicate with made me feel good and brought with itself a sense of gratification that I've never experienced before.

One thing I learnt about myself while doing up the classrooms is that I can be quite a control freak. It was something that I've noticed in myself before, but I often saw it as something minor. But while working together in China, I often found myself wanting to do everything myself. I had to control myself and slowly I understood that everyone here wanted to do their own part in helping the OCSP.

After about a week working on the rooms, I figured out that constantly hanging out in and around the classrooms was affecting my health. The fumes from the paint and thinner, coupled with the biting cold were actually a bad combination for me. I found myself a bit light-headed at times. I often shrugged it off, blaming the altitude more than anything. On hindsight, I realize I wasn't doing any favors for myself. I guess it's another lesson for me to learn; to know when to rest and take things easy. Plus, it sort of led me to not spend

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time playing with the kindergarteners. Often, while the rest were playing with the kids or teaching them art or hygiene, I'd be in the classrooms still painting. This is largely the only regret I have at the end of the OCSP

Among many other things, what I'm truly thankful for the trip was the bonds that I made with the rest of the group. My intentions going into the project was purely to do the community service that the project required of me. But I learnt that without building these bonds, a successful OCSP is nearly impossible. The chemistry within the group was perfect in a sense that almost everyone fit in just nicely, like the pieces of a puzzle. This made working together a cinch. The project made me value human relations more as opposed to just completing an objective. What's the point of putting in all that effort if we're not having fun while we're at it?

At the end of the OCSP, the satisfaction of seeing the smiles on the faces of the villagers brought about a feeling that I cannot easily explain in words. I honestly wished that I had more time there. Besides helping the villagers, living amongst them exposed me to the conditions that they had to experience. With winter only starting as we left and the temperatures starting to hit the negative regions, I wonder how much colder the days were going to be. Maybe one day I'll return again just to see how things have progressed. I'd love to see the whole complex completely constructed and bustling with children everywhere.

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REFLECTION #10: KHAIRIYAH AMIRAH MD RAMTHAN



14 days of December 2013 was well spent in Yunnan, China.

The trip was daunting initially, because of the thought of spending two weeks in the village during the harsh winter days. My worries were justified, as in addition to the cold, the place was a little dirty and the toilets were rather unsanitary, a stark contrast to our lives back in Singapore. Hence, my first day in the village was not one of the best.

As the days progressed, we got used to the standard of living in the village and learned not to complain about everything that we were not used to living with like back in Singapore.

The first day of work was spent cleaning the mosque and playing with the kids. It was a Sunday, and the children who lived near the school decided to pay us a visit despite having no school. They kindly helped us with the cleaning and we played with them during our breaks.

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On Monday, we started the hard work and began our painting jobs. Overall, the job was tiring and we had to brave the cold winds and smell of turpentine over the days. When it was finally completed, all of us felt a sense of accomplishment and were proud of what we did.

On the last few days, we started teaching the children about different hygiene practices and conducted art and craft activities for them as well. We had as much fun teaching them as they did attending the lessons

After 10 days of living in the village, it was hard to say goodbye to the children. I did feel a sense of guilt leaving them, knowing that they got so attached to us over the days and our leaving was rather abrupt.

The trip to Kunming was an eventful one, to say the least. We were warned that there would be a traffic jam on the highway, but we were not prepared for what lay ahead.

The bus had to stop for an hour on two occasions, which was a good opportunity for us to get out of the vehicle and stretch our legs in the middle of the highway. The third and final stop was in the middle of the road, with nothing but snowy mountains on the road shoulders. We were unprepared when we were told that we would have to spend the night in the bus. It was a little challenging, as the cold was uncomfortable.

After a long 20 hour bus ride, we finally set foot in Kunming for our recreation.

Overall, we realised that despite their lack of financial assets, the villagers are as happy as we will ever be. They go on with their lives making use of everything they have and do not feel sorry for themselves. They are proud individuals who do everything to the best of their ability and treat their guests with utmost care and respect, providing for us selflessly, despite their limited resources. This is something that we have to learn and practice to live a better life as well.

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REFLECTION #11: MUHAMMAD FARID BIN MOKHTAR



I love children. It's fascinating how they can go from mischievous to adorable just in a few. That was one of the major factors why I decided to go along for the OCSP trip to China. I wanted to interact and help the kids in the village. Give them the happiness that they deserve. It may be temporary, but to put a smile on their faces, it's something that I wouldn't trade the world for. I knew I had to go on this trip.

So it began. Not before long, I find myself at the premises of the village. An environment which was totally new to me. I spent my first few days acclimatizing myself to the weather, as it was my first time experiencing winter. I was tasked to paint up a mural which was located in between the mosque and the classrooms. Together with a group of other volunteers, I began the uncharted journey of giving the children something to wake up to in the form of a mural. Throughout the days spent in the village, I get to see the children coming through the gates of the school everyday. Some of them wore curious looks, others were just happy to see their friends. They didn't have the luxury of uniform or school bag choices, but they were still there and they never fail to smile. That sets me thinking and appreciating all the luxury I experienced back home. It was a stark reminder
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for me to acknowledge the little privileges I have and also the limited wardrobe that I owned. The journey was really worthwhile.

Another lesson that is etched in my mind is that you are never too young or too poor to learn and share your knowledge. For us here in modern Singapore, we may think twice of going to school even when we have a slight flu. For the kids, the blistering cold winter and also having to travel for an hour to school never succeeded in deterring them from going to school so to fill up their capacity for learning. Equipped with these life lessons, it was a meaningful takeaway for me that I will hold dear. 10 years down the road, I will look up at these pictures and remind myself I am where I am because I take lessons from the OCSP trip and why I love children in the first place. It's because they are our source of lessons and motivation. It is our duty to guide our future generations to lead a better life.

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REFLECTION #12: NUHSYAFIQ BIN ABDUL RAHMAN



One of the things that constantly kept my morale high, despite the chilly weather at the mountainous regions where Yang Tzai village lies, was the mere sight of the village children. Every morning, they would gently stream in past the school gates; glum, sleepy looks on their face. I would silently chuckle as they sluggishly walk past. At that point in time, seeing them reminds me of my own younger brother, just slightly older than them, back in Singapore, probably feeling the same way as these kids when he gets prepared to go to school.

As the morning sun gradually rises and eases its way past the mountains, the chill begins to subside. That's when our work starts, and simultaneously, when the kids get their breakfast. After that, they will get into their morning assembly and dance energetic routines to fast-paced anthems. That is when I truly see joy in their faces, cheerfully mingling with their classmates and singing along to the songs played. Fresh, bright,

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radiant expressions - a far cry from their morning faces. Seeing them happy definitely made me happy as well.

They became my inspiration when I took the helm in painting a sun in one of the classrooms - their curious faces when we took out our smartphones to take selfies with them, faces beaming with genuine smiles. I wondered, in spite of their living conditions, there has to be something that keeps them happy. That became the impetus for the painting – a beacon of hope even in tough times.

As the days go by, we became used to the cold weather, and closer to the villagers and their children. Despite our language barriers, what surprised me was that we still managed to establish warm and cordial relationships with one another. We got to spend more time with the villagers along the way, even having fun activities with the kids, such as colouring artworks and making handheld maracas. We also conducted hand washing and oral hygiene activities with the kids, teaching them proper hand washing and tooth brushing techniques. While cleaning up the mosque, we were even assisted by one of the helpful village kids! The interaction we had with the villagers and their children was one of the defining moments of the trip. When the time came for all of us to leave the village to proceed to town, I can see tears on the faces of some of the kids. You can tell we will be missed, as much as we will miss them.

This has been a trip of many firsts for me, and for most of us. Firstly, I get to experience living in a cold climate without heating technology. I also got to experience interacting with people of an entirely different background from where I came from, albeit having the same religion, and fully learning and appreciating their culture, especially their food, with multiple side dishes for every meal. We were also stuck in the bus for 27 hours, the longest traffic hold up I have ever been in. It is also my very first time in China, experiencing the lives of the Muslim community living in harsh rural landscapes of China. In conclusion, I am truly grateful for this experience, having learnt so many things in a short span of time. I would not trade this experience for anything else, and I would truly treasure it forever.

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REFLECTION #13: KHAIRUL ASHRAF BIN KHAIRUL ANWAR



There is a fast growing trend now that youth expedition projects are doing more harm than good, that it is a mere gimmick. Among some of the more baseless accusations floating in the Internet are that these helpers are merely *voluntourist* – implying insincere intentions, ineffective work, and arrogance reminiscent of colonial attitudes – we are the colonial masters, and any countries less fortunate are ours to ‘help’. But as I soon found out in my expedition to Yangzhai, China, these accusations were not true at all.

First and foremost, as I harshly learnt, developing countries *really* do need help. There was nothing more heartbreaking than watching twenty plus toddlers from a nearby village being crammed into a tiny van for their daily trip to the kindergarten (the place where we stayed) and back. The less fortunate ones would have trudge with their schoolbags through a few kilometers of a dusty beaten path. It was dangerous – moving vehicles slog through the narrow path as well, and the steep slopes running down its sides are treacherous.

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We also saw firsthand the immense poverty that they faced. They lived in small huts made of mud and stone, their brown huts jutting out from the green plantations that were now rendered barren and useless due to the winter cold. As we soon realized, they were desperately relying on an ancient technique: stalks of yellow corn and vegetables hung desolately outside the dirtied walls of their house, all frozen from the morning cold. And that was all they had for the rest of the winter.

Poverty is still existent. It is widespread and existing, and more can be done about it. When I went to China, the first thought that came to my mind was to get more hands helping the villagers, not less. How can one criticize the projects for being unhelpful when he has not seen poverty like I have: non-existent sanitation, zero access to electricity and the daily struggles of even putting food onto the family table?

The second reason why these criticisms are baseless is that our work is *beneficial* and the locals *appreciate* it. On the night we arrived at the village kindergarten, we were greeted by rows of village elders, who braved the brazen wind and relentless night cold. No doubt they were happy for us to help them and for the rest of our expedition, we happily interacted with the locals who stayed in the villages nearby. They understood that we were here to help, and help them we did.

For the next ten days, we re-painted the walls of the kindergarten and refurbished two classrooms with paint. With our funding, a brand new kitchen was installed in an unused room on the ground floor. The result: more classrooms for their children with a more conducive environment for learning. By emphasizing on their education, we are planting the seeds for the upheaval of their social and financial worries.

The third reason why these expeditions must be encouraged is that they ultimately benefit our own Singaporeans youths. If our youths are criticized for being too pampered, another criticism can be justified: apathy towards global poverty. If anything, my horizons were broadened and I felt humbled by their narrow way of life. My thoughts turned to

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good old small Singapore; how we have complained about trivialities like amenities, work-life balance, inflation, without even realizing that somewhere in another country, *poverty* is not just a term in a textbook but an actual social disease. Being up close with the schoolchildren who barely had enough winter clothes to keep themselves warm was more effective in driving home the fact that we, the youth, can and ought to help.

I signed up for this YEP with the intention of helping and teaching the children of China. But as I have shown, it seems that I have taken a lot in terms of experience and learning from this experience too.

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#REFLECTION #14: MUHAMMAD NURI BIN MOHAMED SHAFEI



I daresay, like everyone else, the trip to Yang Tzai Village as part of the Project XingFu III team was nothing short of enriching. The takeaways from the whole experience were numerous, even more than what I have expected in the beginning. It was really not so much of giving back to the society as what I have imagined but now I would argue that the people there gave me more than what I have given them or even what I could ever give them.

As part of the team whose goal was to go over to the ‘impoverished’ village and to alleviate their infrastructure, namely the central kitchen and the children’s kindergarten, I could not help but feel that what I could offer the villagers was limited to the resources and the expertise that they have. With that said, it was also satisfying to see the team accomplish more than what we had initially sought out to do. On top of refurbishing the school and refurnishing the central kitchen, the team also managed to finish painting two classrooms and a huge mural as well as doing a large-scale area cleaning in the proximity

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of the compound. It definitely felt rewarding even for ourselves to see the goals we have set in in Singapore materialize in a remote village far away from home.

Apart from learning to serve the society in China, I was also expecting to learn more about the way the 'less-privileged' people live in the other part of the world and the cultures that are intertwined within the fabric of their society. Of course, I was also excited to experience first-hand just how a community of Chinese-Muslim live, especially since such a community is typically hard to find in Singapore.

What I learnt while I was there wasn't really what I was expecting, if I were to be perfectly honest. Needless to say, I was expecting a backward community that finds it hard to get on by daily. I wasn't completely wrong actually. They were a backward community – they still used horses as a form of transportation, there were no heaters for shower purposes and they were partially self subsistent in a way that they grew their own crops.

However, I could not be more wrong regarding the other part of my sentence. They weren't struggling to get on by daily. Neither were they a grim, unhappy and completely dissatisfied group of people. In fact, I would not be exaggerating if I said that they were probably the most gracious group of strangers I have ever come across in my life. We knew that they had little to offer but they still were very generous when they took us into their village. They were willing to accommodate to our needs as much as they could, from providing us with two thermal heaters per room to whipping up hearty meals whenever it was time for us to eat.

Apart from the adults who were really hospitable towards us, another group of villagers that probably left a greater impression on me was the children of the village. Sure, they were not the most hygienic of kids and neither were they dressed in the nicest of clothes, but they still looked like they were contented with what they have. I'd even argue that they were even more contented than the average Singapore children. I was just astonished by how happy the kids were despite not having half the things an average

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Singaporean child would have. It seems that to them, as long as there were other kids around and no one to harm them, they could continue to have a fulfilling childhood. Obviously I was also happy that I did play a small part in ensuring that the school they attend were more conducive, thus ensuring that the kids could continue to have a more fulfilling childhood.

The lessons I could personally take away was to learn to be contented with whatever that life has given me and never be ungrateful for whatever circumstances that I have been put in. If I were to look at the right places, there's always happiness to be found. And if I were to summarise the whole trip in one word, the word would definitely be 'humbling.'

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REFLECTION #15: NUR ASHIQAH LAU BINTE MUHAMMAD HEIKEL LAU



So

many memories gushed back into my mind as I scrolled through the hundreds almost a thousand of photos I had captured throughout the 14 days of OCSP and I was wondering how I am supposed to choose just one photo to describe what I have learnt during the most amazing experience in Yang Zhai Village. As the saying goes, “A picture speaks a thousand words” and as much as I have learnt and felt during this trip, I could not possibly put them all down in words.

Essentially, a team of 26 students including me spent 10 days in Yang Zhai Village to help paint the newly constructed classrooms, clean the premises, and teach basic hygiene practices to the children. Through these experiences, I have come to realise how much needs to be done to help alleviate the villagers’ standard of living and how the people here although living from hand to mouth can live such happy and fulfilled lives. As I pondered about this I remembered a meaningful quote from Oprah Winfrey, “Be thankful for what you have; you’ll end up having more. If you concentrate on what you don’t have, you will never, ever have enough.” After this trip, I believe that it is important for all of us especially here in Singapore to live by these words. As many of us have gone too far into the rat-race we are living in and the constant need to attain more, we fail to appreciate

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what we already have. Admittedly, many times have I failed to stop to appreciate the fact that I have family and friends that care for me, that I have been brought up in a family that is averagely well to do.

No words can truly describe how I felt every time I see the children. Seeing them so carefree and happily playing with one another made me immensely happy as well. This is also one of the reason why I chose the photo above as I could really feel the boy's happiness beaming through the photo. These kids can find so much joy with just so little. They have also reminded me of my own childhood, when technology was not as advanced as it is today. I worry that kids born in this millennium are brought up from young with all sorts of gadgets at their disposal that they don't know what 'having fun' will be like without those gadgets. Indeed technology has helped us in countless of ways but I believe it has the ability to cripple us as well as we have grown too dependent on it.

I was truly humbled by the way the villagers treat one another and to us. They were very hospitable and never failed to make us feel welcomed into their village. Some of them even insisted that we visit their homes during a short walk through the village. The 'kampung spirit' that they have really amazes me and it is saddening to see that that kind of spirit is lacking here among us Singaporeans.

Every day in the village was a new learning experience and the day that we left it for our R&R was no different either. A bus ride to the town that was supposed to be around 6 hours turned out to be almost 27 hours as we were stuck in a super massive jam along the highway due to road closure. I won't lie that the night was extremely torturous for me as it got very cold and I was not wearing much layers. However, the fact that my friends were also in the very same position as me made me realise that I am never alone even in whatever situations. Realising this really helped me get through the night. And I believe that everything, good or bad happens for a reason. So many great things happened during this jam and I would not have experienced them if it was not for the jam. Many of which were for the first time. I would not have seen/played with snow, see the sunset and moon rising at the same time and even having to pee at the roadside. Just the mere fact of being surrounded by and witnessing the Almighty's breath-taking creations is enough to turn that 27 hours bus ride into something I will never ever forget.

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All in all, I feel extremely grateful to have been given the opportunity to be part of Project Xing Fu III and to go on this amazing OCSP journey with my fellow friends. The feeling you get when you know you have impacted someone's life... indescribable. In many ways, these villagers have touched our hearts and in helping others, you will be able to rediscover yourself as well. And this is the paradox of life, the more you give, the more you get. I truly miss the tranquillity and simplicity the place has offered. If given another opportunity, I would definitely go back to the village again!

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REFLECTION #16: NURUL ATIKAH BINTE MOHAMAD RAZALI



've learnt quite a lot throughout this OCSP trip. We have to always think of others first before ourselves. We don't have our families there to take care of us, and we only have each other. When we were there, I had friends who always took care of me when I'm not well and I would do the same for them too. Even the simplest thing such as lending me their jacket to keep me warm just because mine was not thick enough.

I love PXF3 also because of the friendships forged. I'm really thankful that this trip has brought me, Aly and Hanis closer! We took care of each other during the 14 days in China. To be honest, we were just touch rugby friends, and I don't usually hang out with them. I am really glad that I asked them to join this OCSP with me. They made 14 days seem so short, and made the trip so enjoyable!

When we reached the village, it was already late at night so I didn't really have a good look at the place. But the next morning when we went down for breakfast, the view was

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so beautiful, overlooking the mountains. As soon as the kids arrived, most of us would play with them. I observe the children with their worn out clothes, shoes making their way to the classroom. It left me feeling sad yet grateful at the same time. We have never faced such difficulties yet all we do is complain all the time. I've learnt to count my blessings and always be grateful no matter how difficult it may be.

It was shocking to find out that some of the kids do not know about dental hygiene (brushing teeth) and some even cried when they were asked to do so. On the other hand, we taught them washing hands in a fun manner such that they will remember it and continue to do it. Language may be a communication barrier but we relied heavily on hand gestures and also our Chinese friends to help get our message across.

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REFLECTION #18: SITI RAHAH BINTE MOHAMED BAHARI



Having lived in Singapore for the past 21 years of my life, I realized that the serenity in Yang Tzai was a welcome change during those two weeks. Escaping all the expectations, stress and troubles was something that I was hoping for, and that was precisely what I got out of this project. Helping the people of the village and at the same time, clearing my head was definitely an experience that I needed.

Admittedly, there were a lot of times during those two weeks whereby I was wishing that I was back at home, with all the things that I needed close at hand. For example, clean toilets, the Internet, chocolate, coffee, or even easy access to hot water for a shower. But somehow, the scenery that I saw every morning made it worthwhile. It was so peaceful, beautiful and calming. It was the scenery in the picture that made me to simply grin and bear it. Besides, it wasn't every day that one could enjoy such a beautiful sight, especially in a modernized country like Singapore.

Furthermore, being away from all the comforts of home made me realize how much I've been taking everything for granted. The people in the Yang Tzai village would probably

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love to experience our Singaporean lifestyle, what with a functioning transport system, easy access to clean water, a clean home or even a shopping mall. However, I believe that it is precisely this fact that they have endured their current lifestyle that makes me admire the people of Yang Tzai. They have endured the elements and come out stronger as a person, becoming some of the kindest and most loving people that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

In essence, this experience has been one that I probably will not be able to forget. There were so many unforgettable moments during those two weeks that I doubt that I would be able to fully describe it all with the detail that it deserves. I would however close with a phrase that I feel would best describe this experience and the people of Yan Tzai to me, "Life isn't about getting and having, it's about giving and being. – Kevin Kruse"

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REFLECTION #17: SITI RABI'ATUL A'DAWIYAH BINTE HAIRY



One of the requirements for an SMU student to graduate from SMU is for him to perform at least 80 hours of community service either locally or internationally. The reason for doing this is because, as stated in SMU website under Community Service section is that, “in grooming visionary entrepreneurs and global business leaders of tomorrow, SMU recognizes the importance of preparing our students to be responsible citizens, demonstrating leadership and integrity within the communities they live and work. We want our students to give back to society. Our students are thus required to complete a minimum of 80 hours in community service as part of their graduation requirement.” Each year, there will a certain period where student leaders hosting the community service, both locally (CSP) or internationally (OCSP), will start broadcasting the list of available projects to all the SMU students. Students have to choose their desired choice and wait for them to call for an interview if needed.

Last year, I was alerted by my friends to register for Project Xing Fu III the team leaders are my seniors who are Malay Muslims, and also the fact that the village they had chosen

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happened to be a Muslim environment. It's not that I was being biased towards 'non-muslims' project. It's just that they are certain things which a Muslim should do like performing their prayers regardless of time/place/etc, we have diet restrictions, and one of the main reasons was because I wanted to see and experience how do the Chinese muslims lead their life in the village. Its not everyday that you can see Chinese muslims. I felt confident and believed that this project was the one I should go for so that's what exactly I did with my friends. Alhamdulillah, most of us got in.

This experience has a big impact on me in the sense that the way the Chinese muslims lead their life is very different from Singaporeans. While we were on the way to the village, we had to make a couple of stops for meal times and prayers. The food was fine however, upon reaching to one of the mosques, I was horrified at the condition of the toilet which nowhere near the condition of our mosques here. The toilet had no doors, no lights and even no water to wash ourselves cleanly before prayers. I could literally feel the hairs on my arms and body standing as I made my way inside as one of my friends guarded the door. The cubicles had no partitions too to separate one another and there were no toilet bowls either. There was only a long drain-like structure so you have to squat down and position 'yourself' in between the drain. It was very difficult because I was worrying whether there might be vicious animals crawling below me while trying my best to clean myself with the freezing water from the mineral drink I had left. The abulation process was nowhere comforting because we had to use the males' side as the females' area had no water coming out of the pipes. The other challenges occurred during that period was the prayer time. We had mixed up the prayer times that I missed the afternoon prayers. I was feeling very guilty as...I don't miss my prayers in my daily time basis so the fact that I missed that prayer, I just feel disappointed in myself.

We then proceed to Yang Tzai village and our accommodation which was situated at the high the highest part of the hill where the mosque resides. It was already night time when the vans we were in had to climb up the rocky road. It was pitch black and the only source of light the driver had to depend on was the vehicle's front lights. It was very cold too as the temperature at night dropped. The rocky journey caused my head to hurt very much. I

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suspect I was having motion sickness. Ive never had to experience this in Singapore where everything is nicely laid out for the citizens.



Once we reached there, we were received a very kind welcome by the villagers. I was excited when I saw the Chinese Muslims because it's not every day that happened in Singapore. They were standing in a linear setting and smiled at us. They all looked so cute, the ladies in their hijabs (head scarf) while the men were in their songkok (hat-like head covering used by Muslims). I found out that we would be staying in the bunks located in the flat just beside the mosque, one room for the girls and the other for the guys. Thankfully, the toilets weren't as bad as the one we encountered before. At least, that's what I thought at the point of time. Unfortunately, the heater didn't work to warm up the water so we had no choice but to bathe when needed as the water was freezing so cold that it turned my palms numb and red when I washed them. It was a painful feeling too. I just had to endure myself because we had to stay there for 10 long days in order to finish our job there. There was once when I was doing my 'job' at night and when I wanted to clean myself, there was no water coming out. I panicked and screamed. Turned out the water for our dorms was frozen or blocked so we had to go on without water for that

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fateful night. The toilet bowls sometimes tend to not work so the smell could just kill you if you spend your time too long in the toilet.



The food served that night wasn't bad at all despite being very oily and sometimes salty. There were a few dishes like omelette, long beans, other veggies, minced meat and carrots. We ate them with a bowl of rice. Every meal times, they would serve us the same dishes or if at all different, its just the veggies. We didn't mind at all because we were not supposed to expect meals like we have in Singapore there. There was one time where they served us chicken and it wasn't shocking that there were mainly bones. My favourite food would be the noodles they served along with the vegetable soup. The noodles were very delicious and tasted very fresh that I kept asking for more. Ive never tasted anything like it in Singapore. Possibly because most of the noodles here are instant so doesn't taste as good. I really miss that noodle now. There were a few times during breakfasts where they served us porridge and it was super bland and burnt that I couldn't finish it. Luckily, my mother had put sweet ketchup in my luggage just in case I might not be able to get used to the food there. Some of use brought different things from home which ranged from chilli sauce, sambal belacan, and other snacks. It was very warm to see all of us sharing foods with one another and look after one another. One friend of mine was very sick and had asthma. She said it might be because of the high altitude. There was no doctor in the village so she had to get well by herself. It was very worrying to see her

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always taking in deep breaths and worse, she got flu. She stayed in bed most of the days. Thankfully, she got better eventually. I guess this is something most of us took for granted in Singapore because clinics and transports are everywhere to get treatment.



During the 10 long days, we spent our time painting the classrooms of the children, taught them hygiene and art and craft lessons from time to time, and even clean the mosque compound so the villagers could pray with ease. It was very fun to see the kids smiling and laughing ever so easily. They were always attracted to our cameras because I assumed they had never or rarely seen anything like that. I let them played with it and of course under my supervision. They were very friendly too despite our communication barriers. I really miss them till now. We played with them every single day that they had become one of the normal things we did during our stay. It was very heartbreaking to leave them when we had to leave as we had bonded with them really well. One little boy even cried as he waved at us as the van left that beautiful village.

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We were on the way towards Yunnan in the bus and had to go through the long highway which was located in between the mountains. Unfortunately, there was a very long traffic jam. It was during the afternoon when that happened. From what I heard it was because the snow blocked the highway somewhere at the front end which caused us and all the vehicles there to be stranded in the highway. But it was fun playing on the road at the highway. We took a lot pictures with the majestic snowy mountains as our background since we don't have these in Singapore. We played around until nightfall. There was no progress at all of the jam s we were stuck there throughout the night. Some of us need the toilet because we had been holding it for too long. The guys had to go to the other side of the road while the girls, we had to shield our friends while doing their job with ourselves and our umbrellas. It was a horrible and an embarrassing experience. It didn't help much that the temperature fall as low as -11 degrees. Even the next day, the jam hadn't still moved so we waited with our bellies empty. Few hours later nearing the afternoon, the bus finally moved to Yunnan and that's when our lives went back to normal.

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I have a few takeaways from that experience. Although it happened last year, I can still recall the happiness emotion I felt there. Everything was so carefree and worries free there compared to the hectic life in Singapore where everything is a competition. People would do things to gain something and sometime resort to negativity. But in the village, they live a very simple life and they have what they need; family, food and peace. What I love most is the majestic view of the sunrise and sunset the place was able to give us. Our dorms had a rooftop so we could go up there as when we like. I really love the warmth of the morning sun when it caressed my cheeks and the beautiful sparkle the thousands of stars in the sky gave me when they winked. The nature was breath-taking and something that Singapore doesn't have. One thing that I really envy the villagers is that, despite their living condition in a not developed environment, they still managed to be happy and smile all day upon seeing us. Life there was very peaceful that I felt like I wont mind trading Singapore for a life like that. No busy traffic, no society pressures to succumb, needless to attain high qualifications just so you could live well in a hectic and competitive country called Singapore.

However, there were times when I wished I was in Singapore instead. As we all know that this country is very well developed and establish where technology is always everywhere
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to make our life easier and more efficient. So things like escalator wasn't there in the village when we had to climb up the mountains, there wasn't any proper road infrastructure that the journey was such a roller coaster ride that I fell ill, there wasn't any water purifier to filter off the contaminants that might reside in the water so we just had to depend on the jab vaccinations we got before the trip on not to get infected by any living germs in it, there wasn't any strong heater to warm up the room that I had to wear my thickest clothing from the negative degrees temperature and of course, there wasn't any internet connection for us to surf the net which is one of the most vital things we do every single day In Singapore. We did have sim card for internet access but we could not over use for we need it to communicate with our parents. One thing I really, most ardently appreciate in Singapore is the toilet. We have adjustable water heaters, we have soap, we have water system that 99.9% wont ever stop flowing abruptly, we have bowls that work, we have a lot of useful things implemented in our toilets that we don't notice until we have to go through the hard way.

In a nutshell, despite the pros and cons, I will always love and cherish the experience I had there with my brothers and sisters in Islam regardless of race. I would go back there again if given the opportunity because I really feel happy when Im able to make them happy. This experience has taught me a lot of good qualities like I learn to be patient when I encounter something I dislike, I learn to be more compassionate to those in need, I learn to be thankful for what I have in life because these villagers have nothing compared to our luxurious life in Singapore but still they manage to live happily, I learn to work well with my friends who were once strangers to me, I learn to cooperate well in order to get jobs done efficiently and productively. There are so many good aftermaths Ive gained from this experience. I am very thankful to Ms Mariah Mah for giving us the opportunity to join the PXF team, for looking after us from start till the end, I thank the kind villagers for their hospitality and may Allah reward you for your kindness, I thank my beloved friends for making my stay there an awesome one, I thank Hilmi and Latif for being good leaders and brothers to us throughout this whole journey, I thank my parents very much for trusting in me to be independent as an individual and as a Muslim to live my life

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appropriately without their supervision and most of all, I thank Allah for everything, for always guiding me, for always taking care of me, for always being there for me every single less than a millisecond of the day from the moment I was born till the last day I breathe my last word. Alhamdulillah 'ala kulli hal wa najah wan nikmah.

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REFLECTION #18: SIM JIA LIN



Being one of the only three Chinese on this trip to Yang Zhai Village, I am very thankful for this opportunity and blessed to have been so enriched. The initial apprehension I had due to fear of cultural differences was overcome by interactions with the friendly Muslims whom I was embarking this meaningful trip with. They were all very welcoming and friendly during the bonding sessions before the trip to China and made me look forward to the actual trip with greater anticipation.

On the day we were to depart for China, I noticed how the families were all so friendly with one another even though they haven't met before. I understood that it was part of the culture, but it was that day that I realized how natural it comes to them. It's like the entire Muslim community is one big family – something like what would have been in those kampong days for the Chinese families but now gone. I think it is a remarkable feat to be able to connect with strangers simply based on the common identity of being a Muslim.

When we finally arrived at the village, it was already late in the night. Despite so, the villagers – the village chief, principal of the kindergarten and the teachers came to welcome us in the cold. After realizing that we have yet to have our dinner, the

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teachers even kindly warmed up the dishes for us. It was really heartwarming to be treated with such kindness. Perhaps it is because it is the first time I'm going to be away from my family for such a long time or perhaps it is because of the anticipation of days of hard work ahead, even the smallest act of kindness means a whole lot more. Over the time spent at the kindergarten, the teachers treated us with great hospitality and it made me feel that all the time spent out in the cold painting was really worth it and even more so seeing their happy faces when it was finally done. Besides talking with the teachers from time to time, we were lucky to get the opportunity to chat with the imam on one of the nights and got to understand their culture better. I never thought that there would be Muslims in China, much less an entire village. Talking to the imam and translating the question the students had for him helped me to understand Islam a whole lot better as well. The Chinese Muslims were curious about the culture of Muslims in Singapore as well. It seems like they have never seen Malay Muslims before because some of the teenagers were really curious and you could see the excitement in their faces every time they met the Malay students. It occurred to me that it is such comfort to know that somewhere else out there, there is someone like you despite how different you might be.

The children who I got to interact with were some who made the greatest impact during this trip despite them being as young as 3 years old. One of them was a 9 years old girl, Ma Nu Na, who I was really lucky to have visited. It was actually thanks to Hafeez, who had a friend who visited the same village before and wanted to pass something to her that I got the chance since Hafeez could not converse in Chinese. I found out that Ma Nu Na, despite her poor financial circumstances, is trying very hard in hope of fulfilling her dream to become a doctor someday to save the lives of many. In the midst of the competition in studies, I seemed to have lost sight of what I truly want and she reminded me the importance of having a dream. It's interesting how certain events occur so appropriately. The other kids as well, their pure genuine smiles make the world a little more hopeful. If toothbrushes, candies and chocolates can make them happy, why can't we make do with the small things in life too? It turns out that we certainly can. The principal of the school had sacrificed his job in the city for the position which paid him way less than what he could have been earning had he stayed in the city. He told me that he was initially reluctant to take on

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the job but because there were no other suitable candidates due to the low rate of education among the people still in the village, he decided to fill the role. He said it was to give back what he received. Back in his younger days when he could not afford his own education, others sponsored his studies too. Now that he has a chance to provide proper education for the younger generation, he felt that he should. While it is easy to put others over self in small matters, this involves his livelihood – the possibility that he might not even earn enough to feed his family, and I respect him for that. I believe the support of his family played an important role as well. His sister who was earning a stable income was willing to help out should he really run into financial difficulties and his wife eventually agreed to move to the village with him. Over the time spent at the kindergarten, it made me realize how simple happiness can be. Like how we appreciate the acts of kindest from them, our small contribution of labour through repainting their school and cleaning up the masjid made them really happy. While it definitely has not been a smooth one with the harsh weather, minor disagreements, and small setbacks, we did it. Something I learnt from my friends and the inspiring people I have met in the village which I cannot emphasize more is: many times in life, it really is all but a matter of will. I think this is going to be etched deeply in my heart. I am truly glad to have been part of this meaningful journey with each and every individual involved. They are the ones who made this possible – the villagers, friends and even the liaisons; they made this special.

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REFLECTION #20: SITI NURHIDAYAH BINTE MOHAMAD JUMAT



The awaited 14-day OCSP trip to China finally arrived and I was ready to embark on this whole new journey. Together with other 24 SMU students, we were on a long road to reach our destination. I did not know what to expect but I had told myself to embrace this part of my life. I was driven to meet the villagers and lend a helping hand to the Yang Zhai community.

It was already passed 8pm when we arrived. To our surprise, the villagers were standing near the gate still waiting for us. They extended their warm welcome and made us feel at home. They provided us with couples of heaters and climbed up the stairs to let us have the comforters so as to keep us warm at night.

Soon enough it was time for us to start with what we came for the very next morning. Before coming to China, each of us were assigned responsibilities and roles, however, it was agreed amongst us that we should not restrict to our scope of job. Thus, all of us were given the freedom to help one another regardless.

We began with a debrief on what was the plan for that day and the next few days. Our leader explained to us on the target of completion. Before we could start on with the painting, we noticed that the walls needed to be scrubbed clean. Not only that, we swept the classrooms' floor and the cleaned up the whole mosque.

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I noticed the Village Head, his family and friends smiling when we were cleaning up the area. Sometimes they would come up to us and thanked us profusely. Seeing us work throughout the day, the Village Head's wife would make their traditional sweets for us to munch while working.

It saddened me to come to know that the villagers do not really get to enjoy eating meat as frequently as we do. However, they actually served us meat for our every meal. I believed that the meal that they cooked for us are the kind that they would get to enjoy occasionally. Though the dishes that they cooked for us were almost the same dishes every meal, we truly appreciate their effort and savor what were served.

Ten days in Yang Zhai Village almost came to an end. Tears welled up my eyes to see the kids finally set foot in the classrooms that my team mates and I had cleaned up and painted. The paintings on the wall took their breath away. They were clearly enlivened as their eyes glistened to see the colors that fill the classrooms.

I remember how involved and engaged my team and I were when were deciding on the concept for the classrooms. We considered a lot of themes, from space to garden to mountains and finally decided on the beach and underwater. It was the kind of theme that we thought the kids would be excited to know as they are not near any underwater or beach.

On the last few days in China, we were supposed to head to Kunming from Yang Zhai Village in 10 hours' time, maximum. However, half through our journey, we caught up and the traffic jam lasted for more than 24 hours. This incident tested our level of endurance to the core. We embraced the cold and darkness and spent the whole entire time in the coach in the middle of a huge land of snow that stretches as far as the eyes could see. It was the time where we only had each other to count on and talked to.

Overcoming the hurdle in the midst of helping others and got out of the whole experience stronger were the most priceless thing that were to ever happen.

Project Xingfu III was definitely a journey that opened my eyes, touched my heart and tested my capability.

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REFLECTION #21: SHARIFAH FAATIMAH



One of the most memorable experiences thus far in my university life is a Youth Expedition Project (YEP) to Yang Zhai Village, Yunnan, China from 14th to 21st December 2013. The overseas community project that we went to woke me up from the previously oblivious little bubble that I have been living in.

During the trip I was lucky enough to have been able to experience snow for the first time. You could say that some of us reached the stage of euphoria, and we were laughing non-stop. I remembered how cold it was the moment we stepped out from the airplane into the freezing cold night air, we straight away wore double and triple layers and gloves. This reminds me of the first day in the village – the children were streaming out from the crowded van once they reached the school village (nursery to kindergarten). All of them had cute bulky winter jackets on, most of them stained from the dusty wind, and none had their gloves on. I actually did not realize that part until around the third day. All of us, the Singaporean adults were wearing multiple clothing and the children were so used (or maybe not) to the

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cold season that they have learnt to bear with the biting cold, and were wearing minimal clothing compared to all of us.

This village that we stayed at was one of the poorest Muslim villages in Yunnan. It was evident that some of them were unfortunate not to be able to carry out proper hygiene practices. Some of the daily activities that we did in the school village were to teach the kids how to brush their teeth and wash their hands. Most of them had never brushed their teeth, and it was saddening to see them having early tooth decay. They were taught to eat proper foods and the repercussions of having too many sweets so that they will start brushing their teeth. Courtesy of some of the donations that we received, the children happily went home with toothbrushes and toothpastes. It was a fun experience for me, as I was not able to speak fluent Chinese, I had to resort to using actions and facial expressions instead while teaching them. But of course we did have a translator with us from time to time. We also taught them how to wash their hands according to the steps given by World Health Organization. They were really excited to be playing with soap and buckets of water, and were too happy when they saw their hands so clean. As it was a sandy area in the village, the cold windy season always left their hands and faces dirty.

Our YEP team also painted one big classroom with a beach theme, decorated with sea creatures all over and a few proverbs to brighten up the walls. Some of the walls outside the school were also repainted. Other activities that we did with the children were making arts and crafts, and not forgetting playing around with them during their break time. It was rewarding to see the walls around the school freshly coated with paint, and hopefully it has cheered them up even if it's just a little.

It was definitely an interesting experience leaving with 12 girls in a dormitory, sharing one bathroom and a pantry. But we managed. Since it was winter, we had to boil water every time any of us wanted to shower. Thankfully, we learnt to give and take and be patient on certain things. Furthermore, as I had childhood asthma, I had a few attacks and fell sick a number of times throughout the winter trip. But I

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am so grateful and touched to have leaders and friends who are ever so concerned for my well-being. Even though I wasn't feeling well most of the time, I was very fortunate to have such great people around me that sometimes I forget that I was unwell.

Last but not least, I have to acknowledge the fact that the villages there were so kind and hospitable to us throughout our stay. They were always calling us when it was time for a meal, they were generous, they never fail to ensure that we had clean water to drink, and they even bought extra heaters into our room to make sure that we felt comfortable and warm. Even though they had little, they were always smiling and giving us with whatever they had, that it made all my problems and needs seem so petty.

Lastly, the trip has taught me to be grateful for all the things that I have taken advantage of in life. As Singapore grows with sophistication, sometimes we forget how valuable education, cleanliness and hygiene is, and how fortunate we are to be able to be living in a developed country furnished with infrastructure and a good transportation system (even with a few glitches here and there).

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