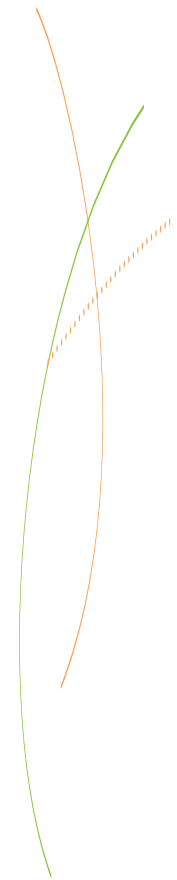


WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE

AN EVALUATION OF
WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE'S
PROGRAMS IN CHINA IN 2004



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In this report I will review and evaluate the work of Wildflowers Institute (WI) in China from late February to December in 2004, using data that I collected through participant observations, site visits, in-depth interviews, and small-scale surveys. Dr. Hanmin Liu's site visits to Beijing and Shanghai in early February, 2004, and their immediate effects has already been reviewed in the previous evaluation. One of the important decisions made during the 2004 February visit was to recruit Ms. Song Qinghua as a special trainer for WI's programs in China and, for this purpose, to bring her to the United States for an intensive training program. This decision proved to be strategically important and fruitful because it turned a new page for WI's work in China, as will be shown below.

Summary

In the first section of this report, I will examine the methodology of Ms. Song's training in the United States and then discuss the effects of this training, especially how Ms. Song applied her training to the actual work of curriculum development in China. While meeting WI's original goal of developing a teaching manual for community leadership in China, Song's work also resulted in a successful training workshop for socially sustainable communities and leadership development in late December in Beijing, which represents a new step forward in WI's China program. More important, by way of the Beijing training workshop, Dr. Liu visited Ningbo, a coastal city in southeast China, and established a new partnership with the local government that will yield more work for WI in China. Almost every step in this direction of work was characterized by high efficiency and fruitful outcomes, a huge success indeed.

In the second section, I will review WI's continuing projects that grew out of previous projects in 2003 or earlier, which include the project on the social health of elderly people in the Sitang community, Shanghai; the research on dietary patterns and public health conducted by a group of scholars at the Capital University of Medical Science, Beijing; and the International Leadership Training project with the Meiyuan community in Shanghai and the Guangwai community in Beijing. The rate of progress in these projects varies from one case to another, but they all produced positive outcomes.

I conclude the evaluation report with several more general comments, all of which are concerned with WI's operation and programming in China.

In short, WI's 2004 program in China was a tremendous success that exceeded expectations. When WI finalized its work plan in early 2004, its only aim was to complete the three continuing projects (see the second section) and the special training program for Song Qinghua that helped her understand the WI theory and tools and prepare for writing the training manual in China. The completion of the training manual was expected to be part of the 2005 work plan. Most noteworthy are the Beijing training workshop and Ningbo

site visit, both of which were not even in the original work plan. When we compare WI's actual achievements with its original work plan, we see that WI's China program did extremely well in 2004 and that its success will lead to an expansion and deepening of its work in China in the near future.

WI's 2004 success may have important implications at a macro level of community building because Chinese society is undergoing rapid changes under the combined impact of a globalizing market economy from the outside world and a radical transformation of social norms/values from within the society. As a result, Chinese communities are facing similar challenges as are their counterparts in the United States, such as the rise of ultra-utilitarian individualism, social isolation and alienation, loss of meaning in life, decline of social trust, increasing generation gaps and crime rates, and the lack of security and safety in communities. But, unlike the United States, China does not have a strong tradition of civil society and public participation, which makes community work even more challenging and urgent. WI's work in China, therefore, is both timely and much needed. Building on its achievements in 2004, WI will very likely reach a much higher level through its training center in the city of Ningbo and other projects in 2005.

The Training Program and Curriculum Development

The Special Training Program for Song Qinghua

One lesson WI learned from its previous work in China was that because of the absence of strong local leadership, almost all projects heavily relied on Dr. Liu's on-site guidance and support in various forms. Admittedly, the push and support from outside was necessary and indispensable as community building from the socio-cultural perspective is a completely new concept in China. However, the outside-in push is in direct conflict with WI's inside-out approach and its theory of socially sustainable community. To address this issue, Dr. Liu made a series of management changes in 2003, including the selection of Ms. Song and her small NGO, the Shining Stone, as the new working partner for WI's program in China. In retrospect, this decision was both timely and important as it reset the direction of WI's program in China and its specific operations, bringing them much closer to their counterparts in the United States and, more important, making a much bigger impact on Chinese society by way of more effectively introducing and practicing WI's theory and method in communities.

Ms. Song began her special training in the United States in mid-April 2004 and continued until the end of May. By "special training," I mainly refer to the guiding principle and the specific methods used in her training, which were designed by Dr. Liu. According to Liu, the only effective way for Song to learn the WI theory and tools in community building is to personally participate in community activities, first discovering them from practice and then learning and understanding them through intensive discussions and reflections with the teachers, who include Dr. Liu, Dr. Ben Davis, and some WI senior fellows. More specifically, this method of experiential learning included Song's participation in WI's site visits and WI fellows meetings, her involvement in community activities in WI's social labs, the more structured and formal training of WI's theory and tools in small seminars, and finally, Song's writing of a training manual for Chinese communities.

I had the chance to observe Song's growth throughout this eight-week training as I also participated in a site visit in April, traveled to San Francisco to interview Song toward the end of the program, and held frequent discussions with her via telephone in between. I was convinced that both the program itself and the training methods are quite effective and transformative, provided that the trainees are open minded and eager to participate in community activities. Song was a bit overwhelmed and confused in the beginning but gradually found the importance and meanings of the WI theory in actual practice. Toward the end of the program, she not only grasped the key concepts, the tools, and the essence of the WI theory of socially sustainable community, but she also completed the first draft of the training manual for Chinese community leaders. In her own

words, the WI lens and mirror (the in-group reference to the WI tools of community building) do not exist on paper; instead, they can be found and used only in the actual practice of community building.

Unlike other WI fellows who have been involved in the development of WI's theory and methods for a long time, Song was the first person who learned the theory and tools without any previous background. Coming from China, she needed to overcome various obstacles in learning, which ranged from the language barrier and cultural gap to the different in sociopolitical systems in China and the United States. The success of her training suggests that the WI theory and tools can indeed be taught and learned in a much wider context (a point that proved true in the context of a foreign country, too, as shown in the training workshop in Beijing in December 2004). Now, a crucial issue is whether the special training methods in Song's training program can be replicated elsewhere and applied to trainees with different backgrounds and still be similarly effective. It is probably also necessary for WI to reflect and analyze Song's training program in a more structured way so that it can be replicated in the future.

The Writing of the Training Manual

After Song returned to Beijing in early June, she continued writing the training manual for the Chinese audience until early December, while exchanging ideas via e-mail with Dr. Liu and other people in WI. Intriguingly, it was during this period that Song made several breakthroughs in better understanding the WI theory of socially sustainable communities. Moreover, as president of the Shining Stone, a Beijing-based NGO for the promotion of public participation, Song was invited to give speeches at several conferences on community construction. She took this opportunity to present WI's concepts and theory to different audiences of community leaders. According to Song, these lectures helped her to collect feedback from the audiences. Song also published two of her lectures and two short essays in Chinese newspapers, a professional journal in the field of community work, and some NGO newsletters. Through these publications, Song was able to disseminate the basic concepts, theories, and tools of community building in the American society to a much wider audience in China.

By November 2004, Song had completed the training manual for WI's training workshop in Beijing. The manual contains four formal lectures, six games and exercises, two homework assignments, and a number of small-group discussions. Song took most of the case studies in the training manual from her training experience in the United States, but she also included several local cases that she had collected in Beijing and Ningbo. In addition, she prepared a trainer's version of the same manual, which has some detailed instructions regarding the organization of the workshop and teaching procedures.

The training manual was well received by the trainees who participated in the Beijing training workshop, and it served the purpose of teaching. A preliminary survey among thirty trainees showed that more than 40 percent of the trainees ranked the training manual (and other training aids) as excellent, while the rest ranked it as very good. There is, however, still room for improvement. For instance, the manual should contain more local cases, and trainees should be given space to use the concepts and theory they learn to analyze specific cases.

Once again, the process of writing the training manual proves that the principle of learning by practicing is cost effective and powerful, as Song practically continued her training program through writing after she returned from the United States. The most important advantage of this training principle is that by learning through practicing, trainees can exercise their agency to the maximum and thus develop themselves from an inside-out approach, which is the very core of WI's theory of community building.

The Beijing Training Workshop in December

The first WI training workshop of socially sustainable community and leadership development was held on December 22–24 in Beijing and was attended by several trainers from the United States, thirty trainees from eight cities in China, a number of volunteers from Song’s organization, and two officials from the Civil Affairs Ministry. The workshop featured Dr. Liu’s formal lecture on the WI theory; Song’s three lectures on WI’s inside-out approach, leadership development, and leadership skills; and a daylong session for Vision-Building. The workshop turned out to be a big success in several ways.

First, the workshop served the original purpose well by providing a lively and intensive forum to test the structure, the procedures, the logistical arrangements, and the training manual of the training program. Based on the information collected in the workshop, WI will be able to revise and improve the training manual in a more effective way.

Second, because the thirty trainees came from eight cities, the workshop also functioned as a springboard for WI to reach far and deep into Chinese communities. While virtually all trainees have expressed the wish to have the WI training workshops in their home cities, WI was able to identify several communities as potential partners for future work at the grassroots level.

Third, the training was effective in changing the way trainees perceive their role in community work and in teaching trainees new conceptual tools and practical skills. Data collected from a questionnaire survey, a non-structured evaluation, and on-site interviews showed that the theory of socially sustainable community opened a new window for the trainees to perceive community work, though they thought that the 2.5-day training was too brief. Nearly two-thirds of the trainees said the concepts of core and interface cultures helped them understand community culture, and many trainees wanted to apply the theory to their work. Most trainees reported that Vision-Building challenged their previous ideas about community work and also inspired many new ideas. All of the trainees agreed that the section on leadership capacity was the most helpful because they can now immediately apply the skills to their work.

The Ningbo Site Visit

As indicated in my 2003 evaluation report, WI is very likely the only foreign institute that has been able to carry out community-building projects at the grassroots level in China. In light of its principle of building community from inside-out, Dr. Liu managed to catch every opportunity to dive all the way to the grassroots level and work with community leaders and ordinary residents within their community, including the latest effort to visit Ningbo communities.

Among the various activities during the two-day visit in Ningbo, the conversations with elderly people in two communities, the direct exchange with community volunteers and grassroots-level leaders, and a semiformal seminar with two officials in local government appeared to be the most noteworthy and productive. While the first two enabled the WI trainers to gain a basic sense of community work in these communities and helped the local leaders identify some key issues, the seminar with local officials who are directly in charge of community-building work effectively paved the way for WI to launch a new line of work in this area. After the site visit, leaders at both the grassroots and the local government expressed a strong wish to invite WI to teach its theory and tools of community building and provide systematic training for leadership formation. The most intriguing point is that people in Ningbo seem to be particularly interested in learning the WI theories on community culture, inside-out development, the WI space, and socially sustainable community, which, together with the Vision-Building tool, constitute the core of the WI framework. Never before has a local government been so willing to collaborate with WI. The government officials are open to learning and experimenting with the WI theory and tools in their work.

Unlike in the United States, the recent push for community building in China came as part of the government’s effort to reorganize the society in the context of the emerging market economy and globalization;

unlike the American government, the Chinese government at all levels still controls the most important resources—whether economic, political, social, and cultural; and unlike American civil society, which has always remained strong and independent from government interference, Chinese civil society has just begun to emerge and learn how to develop itself. Under such conditions, it is almost impossible to building communities in China without the collaboration of local government, and this is particularly true at the grassroots level. Needless to say, it is also extremely difficult for a foreign institute to gain the trust and support of local government for its work at the grassroots level. Therefore, it is safe to say that WI's Ningbo site visit ended up with a golden opportunity that has great potential in the near future.

The New WI Office and Program in China

Encouraged by its successes in 2004, WI has decided to open an office in China and to move its next training program to Ningbo, with the hope that WI will eventually help build a permanent training base in the city that serves community leaders from all over China. Ms. Song was appointed director of WI's China program and Ms. Wang Yanrui, Song's assistant, program officer. As part of the new program in China, Song and Wang will carry out a six-month-long survey/research project among four communities in Ningbo, helping local residents and leaders to uncover the cultural premises in their communities, and then prepare another training workshop in the second half of 2005.

Taking into consideration the recent changes in both government policy and social formation in China, I think WI's new decision to open its China office and to build a training base in Ningbo is timely, important, and strategically sound.

Before the economic reforms and the open-door policy that started in the late 1970s, the social life of Chinese citizens was organized by both the government and the work-units, the various public institutions and enterprises that not only offered jobs to people but also took care of their after-work lives. Communities ceased to exist under such an economic-political regime. By the end of the last century, however, the marketization of the economy and other social-political reforms have effectively ended the work-unit's control over the everyday life of ordinary people, which also means that the government is losing its footing at the grassroots level. At the same time, various social problems emerged as the result of the market economy and modernization, such as a rising crime rate, disintegration of the family, drug abuse, the loss of meaning in life, and the rapid decline of social trust and morality.

To fight these problems and to regain its control at the grassroots level of society, the Chinese government added the reconstruction of communities to its work agenda in 2000 and has gradually made reconstruction one of the priorities for the past three years. Thus far, government-sponsored efforts of community reconstruction could all be classified into two major strategies: the first is to build a socialist spiritual civilization and the second is to provide discounted services to community residents. To do the former, the government relied on the old discourse of socialist morality that encourages individuals to make sacrifices for their country or other collective entities. As can be expected, this effort reverted to the old trap of ideological campaigns and failed miserably. The second strategy worked to a certain extent as some practical issues, such as home repair, shopping facilities, and residential safety, have been solved, and as citizens stopped complaining about them. However, the service-provision strategy could neither stop the decline of social trust and morality nor meet the increasing needs from individuals who are encouraged by the market and consumerism to satisfy endless desires and demands. Obviously, the government has hit a bottleneck in its efforts to rebuild communities in China, and some officials who are in charge of this work have been looking for new alternatives in the past several years. This is precisely the case with local officials in the Ningbo government, which explains why they are so open to WI's theory and tools and so eager to collaborate with WI in searching a new way of community building.

To reiterate, the bottleneck for the government-sponsored efforts to reconstruct communities actually creates a great opportunity for WI to introduce its theory and tools in community building because they represent a much-needed alternative and also because they could bring the American experiences into the Chinese practice. In addition to good timing and huge demand, WI also has the good fortune to find strong support from local government and to establish its basic facility and personnel structure in 2004. WI's new plan to expand its program in China, therefore, is also realistic and feasible.

The Continuing Projects

The Sitang Project

In 2003 and early 2004, WI sponsored a research project on social alienation and isolation among the elders in the Sitang community, Baoshan district, Shanghai. The findings from this project revealed the various structural factors that have contributed to elders' alienation and isolation. The project involved a research team from Fudan University, the medical professionals in Sitang Hospital, and the local government. The close collaboration among the three parties not only ensured the smooth operation of the research project at the grass-roots level but also drew the attention of local policymakers to public health issues, especially the isolation of elders.

Based on the initial findings from this research project, WI made certain suggestions on how to create a public space in the center of social gravity and how to bring the isolated elders into the public space. Both the suggestions and the research findings helped the local government to make the decision to build an open park in a space where the development of commercial housing was planned. The open park was still in the middle of construction during the recent WI sitevisit in late December 2004, and several local leaders openly acknowledged WI's contribution to the construction of the park. As the head of the local hospital put it, "although the local government suffered financially by building a park instead of an apartment complex in the short term, it gained a lot in terms of community harmony and public health, something that is more important in a long run."

To continue its effort to promote the center of social gravity and social capitals in community life, Dr. Liu reframed WI's sponsored project in Sitang during the sitevisit, asking the research team and the local hospital, with the assistance of local government, to design and launch specific programs to help local residents claim and use the new park and document the role of the park plays in community life. This new project will be carried out with the same pattern of collaboration among university researchers, medical professionals, and local government, thus continuing the experiment for an effective, non-confrontational model of community work.

The CUMS Project

By applying the WI theory and tools in their research, a group of scholars at the Capital University of Medical Science (CUMS) discovered in 2003 that many local residents still believed that to be fat is to be physically strong, and this traditional idea directly contributed to the widespread obesity among children as many parents and grandparents encouraged or even forced their singletons to eat more than they actually wanted to eat.

In 2004 research team members conducted a survey of dietary culture and its changes among local residents in the Guangwai community and reported their findings in a formal paper, which included the variety of foods, the quantity of food intake, cooking methods, eating habits, the role of family meals, ways of feeding children, and the recent changes in dietary structure and habits and their links to the rise of chronic diseases among the local residents. Based on these findings, the research team is currently developing a new proposal

for methods of social-cultural intervention in the prevention of chronic diseases and promotion of healthy diets. As in all past projects, WI insists on the inside-out approach and encourages the CUMS team to involve local residents in the intervention project.

The International Leadership Training Program

The International Leadership Training Program was designed to create opportunities for Chinese community leaders to visit American communities and receive a short but intensive training of leadership formation in San Francisco. Two delegations of Chinese community leaders and government officials have participated in the program in the past, and they all considered the training useful and valuable. The program was interrupted in 2004 due to some issues related to applying for entry visas to the United States, but the demands from the Chinese side remain high. WI, however, has raised its expectations for this program and has required interested Chinese communities to submit a formal proposal. In the proposal, applicants must specify what they want to learn from American communities during the training and their plans to apply what they learn to their own work in China.

WI's new requirement will no doubt push the Chinese side to better prepare for their visit and to learn more in the United States. Yet, along with the development of the training program in China and, more important, compared with the new possibility of establishing a permanent training center there, the International Leadership Training Program may need to be restructured so that it can be more effective and far reaching.

General Comments and Suggestions

Programming Flexibility and the Inside-out Approach

I already commented that WI's 2004 work in China benefited greatly from its decision to recruit Song Qinghua in January 2004, which, however, would not be possible without the management changes done in the previous year. In retrospect, we can see that WI benefited greatly from its programming flexibility, that is, constantly making adjustments or changes in its programs in order to maximize the effectiveness of its work.

To illustrate my point, let me cite the most recent example of the training workshop in Beijing, which was not included in WI's 2004 program in China. The idea of organizing a trial workshop to test the training manual was first brought out in late May when Song was about to complete her training program in the United States. Once the workshop was added to WI's work schedule, both Dr. Liu and Song devoted a considerable amount of time and energy to preparing for the workshop, making it the new priority for WI's 2004 program in China.

The flexibility in programming, or the readiness for flexibility, derives from WI's inside-out approach as well. As Dr. Liu put it, WI is always ready to go with the inner strengths in a given community and make changes accordingly, as long as the changes can help the community grow. Here, the real question involved is the ownership of community building: will community leaders and residents truly take charge of building their community? If so, the funding agencies from outside should be ready for programming flexibility because the cultural premises, the key to community building, vary from one community to another.

Using the WI Space in Its Own Programming

A major reason why the WI site-visit to Ningbo was so productive in such a short period of time is that, through its long-term practice in the United States, WI has developed a rather mature way of creating the WI space as a tool to involve people, empower them, and cultivate the inside-out strategies in a given community.

The WI space first emerged through people's interactions that were brought out during the early Vision-Building sessions, when participants opened themselves up to one another and exchanged their ideas and understanding about various pressing issues in their communities. Through repeated communication and interactions under similar circumstances, WI realized that it is both effective and meaningful to purposely create such a relational space that is open, safe, and spiritually inspirational to all participants. In addition to Vision-Building, other techniques were invented to help create the WI space, such as spiritual ceremonies, prayers, seating arrangements, and structured commentary and reflections.

Once being named and claimed as a WI tool, the WI fellows have been consciously creating the WI space in almost every WI gathering and activity. The tool was first used to bring together community leaders who were otherwise divided by ideological differences or factionalism, and then it was used among the WI fellows for their own personal growth and learning during WI meetings because the presence of other fellows constitutes a key element in the space. Lately, the WI fellows also experimented with the tool to improve intercommunity exchanges and mutual understanding by bringing leaders of different communities into the WI space.

With the creation of such a space, WI could quickly transcend various local limitations, such as factionalism, ethnic boundaries, gender/generation-based hierarchy, or differences in political regimes, and help local community leaders to see the otherwise invisible through a new perspective. This was exactly what happened during the Ningbo site visit. When Dr. Liu and other members of the visiting group engaged in conversations with local residents, introduced the WI concepts to community leaders, and discussed various issues with both residents and leaders, the WI space emerged and began to function. What made the Ningbo case a bit special is that the two government officials immediately realized the value of the WI theory and the WI space and embraced them with open arms, while in some other cases the government leaders in China were less receptive to the new theory and tools.

An additional positive development was that in both the Beijing training workshop and during the Ningbo site visit, Ms. Song was active in creating the WI space. She regarded this as one of the most valuable tools that she learned from her U.S. training and has benefited from using it on different occasions. Song's case shows that the creation of the WI space is a replicable and effective tool that can be applied to different social-cultural contexts.

This may have important implication for WI's U.S. programs, too, because thus far Dr. Liu has played a key role in the creation of the WI space during most site visits and fellows meetings in the United States. A noticeable exception was the site visit to Lao Iu Mien community in October 2004 where several youth leaders were asked to run two meetings as part of their leadership training. They did create a WI space with some new characteristics. Judging from the successful experience of these individual examples, it seems to me that WI should consciously make the creation of the WI space a part of the leadership training and require WI fellows to practice it in various contexts, such as the WI sitevisits, fellows meetings, and community gatherings.

The power of the WI space in carrying out its own programs reveals that the WI theory and tools can work at different levels, including the level of WI's own operation. It seems to me that the use of the WI tools in its own programming remains by and large an unconscious effort; it may become even more effective if the WI fellows can reflect on their own experiences of using the tools and develop a more manifested way of using them in not only community building but also the WI programming.

Youth Leadership and the WI Program in China

While recognizing the centrally important role played by Song Qinghua in 2004, we must also be aware of the fact that, in order to continuously expand and deepen WI's program in China, the training of young program officers has emerged as a real and urgent issue. This is as important as the cultivation of youth leadership in communities, because both provide the very base for sustainability.

Wang Yanrui, for instance, demonstrated great potential during the Beijing training workshop. She is efficient, organized, and considerate. More important, she is devoted to community building and eager to learn the WI theory and tools. Working with Song, she can very likely become an important player in WI's long-term work in China. At the local level, Ms. Le Yi in the Xujiacao community in Ningbo, who helped to create the newspaper reading and "supermarket of love" programs in the community, stands out as an excellent candidate for a WI fellow in the future because of her respect for other people's dignity and her capacity to mobilize the power and resources from within the community.

Both the emerging needs and the availability of outstanding candidates show that it is perhaps time for WI to consider the cultivation of youth leadership in China, just as it has already started to do in its U.S. programs.

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For more than a quarter of a century, Wildflowers Institute has focused on leadership development and community building in the United States and abroad. We help communities uncover and utilize the strengths

of the various cultures within the community. Wildflowers helps them plan, grow economically, and be more socially sustainable by:

Discovering the virtues, self-organizing principles, and formations of family and community and applying that understanding to the planning and development of programs, services, and policies

Developing leaders among youth and adults rooted in the cultures of the communities

Designing social spaces for civic engagement

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