

The Wildflower Processes and Tools in China: An Evaluation Report (February 12, 2003)

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In October 2002, the author of this report was commissioned by the Wildflowers Institute to serve as an external evaluator for its ongoing projects of community culture and community construction in the People's Republic of China, focusing on the effectiveness, replicability, and actual impact of the Wildflowers processes and tools. To become familiar with the Wildflowers theories and methods, the evaluator went to VisionBuilding sessions in San Francisco and Los Angeles and participated in some activities during the visit of the Meiyuan Leadership Delegation of Shanghai to San Francisco in November 2002. Observations and analysis of these programs were presented to the Wildflowers Institute in two earlier brief reports. From January 17 to 26, 2003, the evaluator joined Dr. Hanmin Liu, together with Professor Qi Kangnan, in site visits to communities in Beijing and Shanghai and participated in all activities during this period, observing the Wildflowers theories and tools in action, interviewing Chinese community leaders, scholars, and ordinary citizens who participated in the projects, and also sat in Dr. Liu's meetings with local government and community leaders. The findings presented in this report are based on reviews of Wildflowers documents, participants' observations of the Wildflower processes and VisionBuilding sessions, and personal interviews in China and the United States.

This report consists of three sections. The first section discusses the effectiveness of the Wildflowers theories and methods in China. The most impressive effect thus far has been to provide local leaders, researchers and ordinary people with a new lens for looking at their own communities. The assets-oriented approach, the hallmark of the Wildflowers framework, has also been effective in empowering government and community leaders to explore new frontiers in their work, especially in creating a new space for public participation. The second section focuses on the actual impacts of the Wildflowers processes and tools on community construction and development, which include paradigm shifting, uncovering community culture, formation of community leadership, and the establishment of social labs. In the last section, the applicability of the Wildflowers model in a larger social context is briefly discussed. In each section, assessments remarks are followed by recommendations for possible future improvement.

I. The Effectiveness of the Wildflowers Framework

Overall, both the Wildflowers processes and tools have been working well at various levels of the local leadership and in the designated communities in Beijing and Shanghai. The community leaders I met were not only satisfied with the collaboration experiences with the Wildflowers Institute but also expressed enthusiastically their willingness to expand and deepen the ongoing programs.

1. The Wildflowers Lens

For leaders of local government and communities, the Wildflowers framework represents a new way of defining, approaching, and working with urban communities, which has to be understood in the context of contemporary political economy in China.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the work-unit system replaced the family/kinship-based social group or associations to perform social-cultural functions in community life, ranging from cultural activities to social support of the elderly. The work-unit system, however, has undergone a transformation from a multi-functional social institution to a profit-oriented enterprise, gradually dropping out its previous grip over community affairs. As a consequence, local government and community leaders are facing a dual crisis: the lack of a new community paradigm and the lack of a working framework in sustainable community development. On the other hand, realizing the declining importance of the work-unit system in people's social life, the central government has prioritized community building as one of its development strategies in the twenty-first century. In this sense, the Wildflowers framework was introduced to China in the best historical moment when local government and community leaders need very much to find a new way of community building.

According to my observation, thus far, the Wildflowers framework has worked best in providing the leaders and Wildflowers program participants with a new lens to look at the communities. This is because the leadership formation in Chinese communities is much more formal than its counterpart in the United States, and the Chinese leaders are used to a top-down and outside-in approach in their work. According to Mr. Liang Wannian, vice president of the Capital University of Medical Science (CUMS), Mr. Du Lingxin, party secretary of the Guangwai sub-district office, Beijing, Ms. Wang Wanru, deputy director of the Community Administration Committee in the Pudong district, Shanghai, and Ms. Zhao Qiong, deputy director of the Meiyuan sub-district office, the importance of community culture, the assets-oriented approach,

and the sharing of visions through VisionBuilding sessions are what they found most helpful and valuable in creating a new way of community building. Mr. Du Lingxin, for example, told me that he had experimented with using the Wildflowers tools to share the government's vision of community development with the local residents, and the result was surprisingly positive. Some leaders also emphasized the conceptual power of the Wildflowers framework. For instance, Mr. Liang Wannian reviewed his shifting views regarding public health and community life (more on this below), and Ms. Wang Wanru pointed out that the notion of core and interface cultures enabled her to see the urgency of promoting cultural diversity and ethnic harmony in the Pudong district where the increase of non-Chinese residents is astonishingly rapid.

Similarly, the participants of the two public health programs, one from CUMS in Beijing and the other from the Sitang hospital in Baoshan, Shanghai, all noted that the Wildflowers framework worked effectively as a lens for them to uncover the social-cultural aspects of health problems. More importantly, with the assets-oriented approach and vision-sharing tool, they have expanded the scope of their work from mere disease-control to understanding the community and the complex relations among people, community, and public health; hence a shift from a medial-technical perspective to a social-cultural perspective.

2. Promoting New Space for Public Participation: An Unexpected Outcome

Both the local leaders and program participants noted that the Wildflowers framework, especially the vision-sharing tool, helped them to find a new way to promote public participation in community affairs. Several community leaders praised the VisionBuilding tool and the vision-sharing approach for their power to break the

hierarchical structure of interpersonal relations in Chinese communities, enabling the subordinates to speak up in front of their leaders. Others noted that the tool is highly accessible to ordinary people who can easily express their ideas through visual language. Another advantage of the VisionBuilding tool, noted by everyone I interviewed, is that it promotes public participation. For instance, Mr. Du Lingxin reflected that previously the leaders had always worked in a top-down fashion, first finding out what would be good for the community and then carrying it out for the community. Sometimes, the leaders' vision did not meet the needs and expectations of the community residents, which often resulted in the lack of support from below or even with conflicts between community leaders and residents. In the above-mentioned experiment of applying the Wildflowers tools in community work, Mr. Du and his colleagues shared their visions about how they would improve the physical environment of the community with its residents before actually carrying out the plan, and they were surprised to see how enthusiastically the residents participated in the vision-sharing process. Through the process, the leaders collected more than 100 suggestions/comments from the residents, which enabled them to better understand the needs and expectations of the people. The final plan combined the leaders' original vision with some suggestions from the residents, and its execution was quite successful due to the support and cooperation of the people. More importantly, Mr. Du reflected, because people were proud of their contribution to the process, they volunteered to help the government office contribute their efforts to the project, such as signing up to watch the neighborhood or to guard the new green fields.

It is likely that the Wildflowers framework may create a new public space for vision-sharing between the leaders and the masses and a new channel for public participation in community affairs. This is particularly intriguing because public participation has always been a politically sensitive matter in the PRC. The declining role of the work-unit system and the impact of market economy have made the party leaders realize the importance of public participation in contemporary social life, yet maintaining the fine balance between mobilizing the citizens and preventing potential social disorder remains an unsolved issue. Although the central government has tried to develop programs of grassroots-level democracy in recent years, many of its old ways of mass mobilization are now simply ineffective due to the lack of cooperation and support from below. The Wildflowers framework introduces a new notion of community that is based on the social capital of the people and community culture, and it has provided new tools of promoting public participation that better fit social conditions under the market economy. In addition, it does not carry any political baggage that may remind people of the recent past under radical socialism. These features of the Wildflowers framework may have been taken for granted in the United States, but they become vitally important in the context of contemporary Chinese political economy. In my opinion, the potential impact of the Wildflowers framework on Chinese society in this aspect, i.e., as a new way of promoting public participation, is at least as important as its other influences that have been demonstrated in community development in the United States.

3. The Wildflowers Mirror

In American communities, the Wildflower framework also serves as a mirror for people to look at their own community and uncover the strength and virtues from within.

This “mirror” function, however, has not been as effective as other functions in the Chinese context. While everyone I interviewed in China praised the “lens” function of the Wildflowers framework, few have reflected on its “mirror” function. This marks a sharp contrast to community leaders in San Francisco and Los Angeles who all emphasize how the “mirror” has empowered them and fellow community members.

Yet, I also want to point out that during the site visits, the mirror function of the Wildflowers framework emerged and caught my attention twice, and they all occurred during VisionBuilding sessions participated by ordinary community members. For instance, during my interviews with the elderly people in Guangwai, Beijing, who had just completed a VisionBuilding session, some made a distinction between a natural person (ziran ren) embedded in harmonious relationships and a market person (shichang ren) driven by desires and competition. They lamented that many of their adult children had fallen too deeply into the trap of becoming market-oriented persons, and commented that the best they could do was to educate their grandchildren to become natural persons. The reflective sparks like this one, however, tend to be overlooked by local government/community leaders who focus on promoting economic growth and getting the tangible results of the market economy.

The relative under-appreciation of the mirror power of the Wildflowers framework may result from the fact that the community culture programs in China have only recently been carried out for, and the mirror function has yet to fully play out. While being true to a certain extent, this obvious factor cannot explain why the “lens” function of the Wildflowers framework has been so effective and why the Wildflower tools have helped to create a new way of public participation. It is possible that the

Wildflowers framework and tools have been selectively accepted and then applied in the ongoing programs. If this is the case, I suggest that the Wildflower Institute explore the dynamics and reasons of the selection process and, if possible, emphasize its mirror function in the curricula next year and see how it works out.

II. The Actual Impact of Wildflowers Framework

In practice, the programs of community culture and community construction in Beijing and Shanghai have had some obvious influence and perceivable long-term impact on the local government/community leaders as well as on the designated communities.

1. Paradigm Shifting

As indicated above, many local government/community leaders embraced the Wildflowers framework as a new way to look at and work with local communities, and many of them reflected on the experience of paradigm shifting. For example, Mr. Liang of CUMS revealed a three-stage process whereby he completely changed his view regarding the relationship between public health and community building. In the initial stage, Mr. Liang had serious doubts about the relevance of community culture in his work and could not see how Wildflowers' vision-sharing approach works for public health. In the second stage, he was able to see the links between culture and health issues, such as the cultural premise of smoking as a status symbol and a connection-building mechanism. It is only in the third stage that he began to see that diseases, public health, and culture are all situated in communities. Based on this new recognition of the importance of community and culture, he has developed a plan to establish a Center of Community Development at his university and wants to promote and localize the Wildflowers

processes and tools in public health education. When being asked what the major shift will be, Mr. Liang replied clearly that it was a shift from medical-technical paradigm to a community-cultural paradigm.

It should be noted that Mr. Liang is by no means alone in reflecting on the paradigm shift during my interviews. Actually, most interviewees acknowledged that a paradigm shift (although different people used different ways to describe this process) is the most important influence that the Wildflowers framework has had, and many of them also contributed the successful shift of paradigm to the training seminar in Beijing in 2001.

2. Uncovering Community Culture

As indicated above, VisionBuilding has proven to be a successful tool in bridging the gap between formal leaders and ordinary people, and in promoting public participation and vision-sharing. It also works well in the ongoing programs that are aimed to uncover patterns of cultural formation in local communities.

VisionBuilding and other Wildflowers curricula seemed to have the strongest impact on the two public health programs. With the paradigm shift that is articulated nicely by Mr. Liang, the CUMS team achieved all the goals for year 2002, which include the completion of two community-based research projects (one on “clinical pathways” and the other on health behavior and chronic diseases) and the training of its research team. In the other site, the Sitang hospital of Baoshan, Shanghai, a research team led by Dr. Gu Jiaduo, the director of the Sitang hospital, completed a systematic sample survey of 307 people of 60-years-old or older, randomly selected from six neighborhoods, focusing on the relationship between the health conditions of elderly people the on one

hand and the social-cultural conditions of family life and community life on the other. In comparison with other programs, the revealing power of the Wildflowers framework seems to be most obvious with the Sitang hospital research team, as they were able to find a completely new way of promoting public health and improving the health consciousness of the elderly through the use of the Wildflowers lens and tools. Virtually everyone I met during the site visit was excited about what they were able to uncover with the Wildflowers approach and what they have learned from the Wildflowers curricula. Both Dr. Gu and Dr. Xu Yueqing (also from the Sitang hospital) praised the Wildflowers training seminar as the most important channel for them to learn about Wildflowers' theoretical framework and tools.

The research team from the Sociology Department of Qinghua University, which is led by Professor Jun Jing, has also accomplished its goal well, that is, to examine the relevance of filial piety in contemporary family and community lives. The investigation on the living conditions of elderly people in the Guangwai community shows that love and attention are the most important concerns of the elders, which points to the importance of a healthy family life. The VisionBuilding tool was used in a small project to explore the expectations and cultural premises of elderly support. One of the main findings is that the expectation of economic support from adult children has been decreasing while the demand for love and attention are on the rise, which confirms the first investigation based on interviews. Another important finding of the second project is the importance of family care during the last stage of one's life, namely, the dying stage. Focusing on this issue, a member of the Sociology Department team carried out a

third research, which is, in my opinion, highly original and, once published, will catch the immediate attention of scholars of family studies and practitioners of public health alike.

3. The Wildflowers Curricula and Leadership Formation

As I mentioned in my previous reports, the process of leadership formation in community construction, which is arguably the most important factor in community building, is different in China because community leaders above the neighborhood level are government-appointed cadres and also because community construction is part of the government's agenda. In other words, structurally, community leadership in China is both within the government and under the directorship of local government. It is in the context of this political culture that I highly value the new paradigm that the Wildflowers framework has introduced to the local government/community leaders, because it has the potential to create a new public space for two-way communications. For the same reason, the fact that local leaders appreciate the Wildflowers tools in promoting public participation is quite a phenomenon. By creating a new space for communication and a new bridge of interface between the leaders and the ordinary people, the Wildflowers framework may have a long-term impact on the leadership formation process at grassroots level. The above-mentioned case of public space beautification in the Guangwai sub-district is a good example in this connection, and the success of the project has prodded the Guangwai leaders to learn more about the Wildflowers framework and use it to train more grassroots level leaders.

4. Social Lab and Training Base

The Wildflowers Institute aims to identify two to three communities in China as social laboratories for learning community cultures from within, and for training community leaders. By January 2002, Wildflowers Institute has made significant achievements in this front, some of which have gone beyond its initial goal. The selection of Guangwai community in Beijing and Meiyuan community in Shanghai is very thoughtful and visionary, because they are strategically very important as far as the challenge of the market economy on community culture is concerned. The former is characterized by its currently strong core culture and relatively less developed market economy in the capital city, Beijing, and the latter stands out as the fastest growing urban community in the newly emerged or reborn cosmopolitan city, Shanghai, and thus features a much stronger interface culture. Putting them together, the two social labs constitute the ideal test ground for the Wildflowers framework. The patterns of cultural formation and leadership formation, among many other potential findings, in these two representative and high-profile communities will have very significant implications for other communities in Beijing, Shanghai, and even the entire country.

During my site visit, I was impressed by the mutual respect, trust, and rapport between the Wildflowers Institute and local leaders and collaborators in the two social labs, and such a firm foundation is certainly critically important for any projects in the future. It should be noted that rarely local leaders from anywhere in China are so willing to open their communities as social labs to foreign researchers. But the Wildflowers Institute has seemingly achieved more than establishing good social labs. As indicated above, while acknowledging the effect of Wildflowers curricula and tools, the leaders in Guangwai and Meiyuan expressed strong wishes to continue and expand the Wildflowers

programs in their communities, and also to begin exploring the possibilities of establishing training base for community leaders, which will be open to other communities in the two cities and beyond. This training base plan is particularly important because it will open a whole new dimension for the Wildflowers curricula in China and significantly increase its ability to replicate its processes and tools in a much larger context.

5. Wildflowers Framework Among Ordinary People

It is not very clear how well the Wildflowers framework will work among ordinary people in China because most leaders and program participants have focused on the “lens,” instead of the “mirror,” brought out by the Wildflowers tools. However, based on the limited reflections by local leaders and on my own observations during two VisionBuilding sessions that involved some ordinary people, I am confident that it can work effectively among the rank-and-file in local communities as well. Without exception, participants of the VisionBuilding sessions were excited, enthusiastic, and quite open in speaking up. During my interviews with them, many noted that VisionBuilding opened a new horizon in their minds, enabled them to see things they had never thought about before and even increased their powers of imagination. They also felt happy for being respected and valued in VisionBuilding sessions, which explains why the power of the Wildflowers framework in promoting public participation lies in its emphasis on the strengths and virtues of the people themselves.

6. Comments and Recommendations

It may be necessary to carefully review the paradigm shift process among government/community leaders and researchers/participants of the community culture

programs in Beijing and Shanghai. The review results should be put in written form and, if possible, published as internal working papers or booklets. Some of these publications can be used as teaching materials in future training workshops, helping others to shorten the learning curve and to more effectively use the Wildflower theories and tools. Some of these results may in turn contribute to the continuing refinement and development of the Wildflowers' framework.

The systematic review and summary of the achievements and lessons in 2002 will also enable the Wildflowers Institute and its partners to spell out more specific goals for each program in the new year. Some effort may be made to encourage the mirror function of the Wildflowers framework and to find out ways that enable people in a community to explore and uncover the internal strengths and virtues of their community. This may also mean focusing on an inside-out approach and an emphasis on working more closely with ordinary people in the designated communities. In this connection, the anthropological theory and practice of fieldwork may be helpful for participants/researchers of the Wildflowers program in China. One of the basic conditions of anthropological fieldwork, for example, is that the researcher should live in the community for a substantial period of time and work closely with people from all walks of social life.

III. The Applicability of the Wildflowers Framework

The initial success of the community culture programs in Beijing and Shanghai, the development of the two social labs in Guangwai and Meiyuan communities, and the good rapport between the Wildflowers Institute and its Chinese partners all indicate that

the basic social conditions for replicating the Wildflowers framework in China have been established. Technically, the same set of Wildflowers' curricula and tools have been used and testified in different programs, ranging from cultural virtues and social health to leadership formation. Although the final outcomes will vary from one project to another, all projects share the common achievements in paradigm shifting and the promotion of public participation, the two most important effects that the Wildflowers framework has produced. These achievements show that it is very likely that the Wildflowers curricula are replicable and that the Wildflowers framework can be applied to other communities in China. To achieve this goal, however, more work will need to be done, and the following steps, in my opinion, may be helpful.

First, to explore and illustrate how the Wildflowers processes and tools work in the Chinese context, several systematic and in-depth case studies of the Wildflowers program are needed. These cases studies can be on either ongoing programs or new ones, and the results of these case studies should be used as the building blocks for teaching materials for the transmission of Wildflowers framework to a much wider audience.

Second, the literature of the Wildflowers curricula is mostly limited to English sources at the present, which limits the reach of the Wildflowers framework in China. It may be necessary to translate the Wildflowers Institute papers and other teaching materials into Chinese and publish them in the form of working papers or teaching booklets. It will be extremely valuable to introduce the American experiences of community building and development to the Chinese audience, and this probably means an even larger translation project. However, without a substantial corps of theoretical

literature, case studies, guidance booklets, and other teaching materials, it will be difficult for the Wildflowers curricula to be sustained and developed.

Third, the Wildflowers Institute may need to train more Chinese researchers who not only use the Wildflowers framework in their work, but also master the framework and transmit it to others. Thus far, Dr. Hanmin Liu's on-site lectures constitute the most effective way of transmitting Wildflowers' theories. Yet, to apply the Wildflowers framework in a wider context, it may be necessary to have more individual researchers/practitioners who can lecture on the Wildflowers framework and train others in future training workshops.