

Senior Volunteering in Service to Community Elders in Shanghai: Bringing Together Agendas for Productive Aging and Community-Based Social Support for the Aged in China

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Abstract In this article, I examine recent ethnographic data on the subjective meanings of volunteering expressed by Chinese older adult volunteers working within community-based non-governmental-organization (NGO) projects supporting aging in place for ailing elders and their family caregivers in Shanghai, China. In examining this data, I analyze what older adults' community-based volunteering means to them in the context of broader questions about the potential for bringing together gerontological agendas for productive aging and community-based social support for the aged. I argue that these Chinese older adult volunteers bring special strengths to community volunteering in support of the aged, and that their choice to serve community members of advanced age also brings distinctive benefits to them as volunteers. This pairing of older volunteers with senior community recipients has demonstrated excellent potential, as well as some important challenges.

Keywords Productive aging · Social support · Senior volunteers · Aging in place · China

Introduction

Productive aging among active older adults and social support for frail or ailing elders are often dealt with as separate agendas in the gerontological literature. In this article, I bring these two agendas together. In the pages to follow, I examine recent ethnographic data on the subjective meanings of volunteering expressed by Chinese older adult

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volunteers working in community-based non-governmental (NGO) projects supporting aging in place for ailing elders and their caregivers in Shanghai, China.

This is an important topic with ties to gerontological literature on social support for the aged (Thorslund and Silverstein 2009) and productive aging (Peng and Fei 2013). In response to concerns about global population aging and the limits of family and institutions to supply care, gerontological research has shown that community-based supports for aging in place can play a vital role in supplementing family-based at-home care (Sokolovsky 2009). This is crucial in that in most societies the majority of seniors prefer to grow old in their own homes (Hooymann and Kiyak 2011), with China as no exception (Zhang 2009). Studies have found that community-based initiatives to build aging-friendly neighborhoods tend to be tailored to local needs, as well as cost-effective (Stafford 2009).

Regarding the senior volunteer dimension of my inquiry, recent research has shown substantial positive correlations for older adults who volunteer, including better health, emotional state, quality of life, family relations, social support, and longevity (Anderson et al. 2014; Carr et al. 2015; Cattan et al. 2011; Gorey 1998; Greenfield and Marks 2004; Harris and Thoresen 2005; Hinterlong et al. 2007; Hong and Morrow-Howell 2010; Jirovec 2005; Kumar et al. 2012; Martinez et al. 2006; Morrow-Howell et al. 2003, 2014; Musick et al. 1999; Von Bonsdorff and Rantanen 2011; Wheeler et al. 1998). Some studies have even shown that volunteering improves life satisfaction in older volunteers even more so than in younger volunteers (Van Willigen 2000). The subjective meanings angle that I am adopting is also critical in that recruiting and retention of volunteers and the quality of their experience as volunteers, as well as the experiences of the recipients of assistance, all tend to be greatly influenced by how volunteers interpret the service work they do (Matz-Costa et al. 2014; Sellon 2014; Shenk and Mahon 2009).

China, a rapidly-aging newly middle-income country, which has “gotten old before getting rich,” is a key locale from which to examine these issues. Rapid economic development, nutritional and medical advances, urbanization, increases in maternal education and female employment, and family planning policies limiting fertility have all contributed to the speed at which China’s population has aged (Du and Yang 2012; LaFave 2016; Zhang 2009). As of 2013 almost 14 % of China’s population was over the age of 60 (UN DESA 2013: 94), up from 8 % in the 1980s, and it is expected that by 2050 one in three people in China will be elderly (Mui 2012: 6). This is leading to age-structure imbalance, raising concerns about eldercare provisioning in the present and future. Part and parcel of this, China is already experiencing an increasing need for supplements to traditional family-based care (Chen et al. 2016; Du and Yang 2012; Hoffman 2013; LaFave 2016; Zhang 2009, 2016).

In addition to governmental, professional, institutional, and for-profit interventions, community-based assistance from lay volunteers and non-governmental organizations is beginning to be seen as offering promising resources for eldercare as the population ages. In facing what has been called the 4-2-1 problem (one child, two parents, four grandparents), China has set a national target in the 90-7-3 eldercare policy, in which of 90 % of elders should receive family-based care at home (居家养老), 7 % community-based care (社区养老), and 3 % institutional care (机构养老) in a nursing home facility (Chinese State Council 2011a), a policy that urban areas strive to follow with some modifications (e.g., while Shanghai aspires to 90-7-3, Beijing aims for a 90-6-4 ratio).

However, despite raising the importance of non-governmental non-familial assistance, the most prominent current national aging policies in China do not engage in detail the third sector participation of older adults serving community elders aging in place (Shea, *forth.*). At the forefront of population aging in China, Shanghai has been piloting innovative programs in this regard such as those described in this article, which may offer ideas for other areas undergoing similar demographic change.

The significance of China's experience holds broader relevance in that many developed and developing countries around the world are facing similar demographic challenges (Robinson *et al.* 2007; Bloom *et al.* 2015), while coming up against the limits of both families and the welfare state for addressing them (Thorslund and Silverstein 2009). Many countries with aging populations are increasingly looking to third-sector NGOs and volunteers to help assuage the emerging crisis of care (HelpAge International 2015). In addition, those low-income countries beginning to experience, or anticipating future, population aging are more apt to look to China as a model for future aging policy and programs than they are to "first-world" developed countries whose trajectory seems too distant (Ogato 2013).

This research fills several important gaps in the scholarly literature. Thus far, little research has been published on the volunteerism of older Chinese men and women, especially in terms of NGO involvement in support for aging. Scholarly literature on aging in China thus far has tended to focus on vertical support from younger family members, rather than on horizontal support from non-familial community members. The few existing scholarly articles about volunteering and the aged in China have tended to focus on youth volunteering in service to the elderly, rather than on older adults themselves as volunteers. Scholarly work on Chinese seniors as volunteers in mainland China are relatively rare, though increasing, with some notable path-breaking gems (e.g., Chen and Gao 2013; Greenfield 2012; Li 2012). Thus far, many more such studies of Chinese senior volunteerism are sited in Hong Kong or Taiwan (e.g., Chan and Liang 2013; Chong 2010, 2012; Cheung and Ngan 2000; Lin *et al.* 2014; Lum 2013; Lum and Lightfoot 2005) or parts of the Chinese diaspora (e.g., Mui *et al.* 2013; Newendorp 2016).

Beyond China, gerontological literature on volunteering has also tended to be bifurcated, focusing either on the benefits of senior volunteerism and civic participation for productive aging in active older adults (e.g., Anderson *et al.* 2014), or on the benefits of youth and younger adults volunteering in support of needy elderly beneficiaries (e.g., Karasik 2007). This article joins a small, but growing, body of literature that brings together those two themes, by examining volunteer efforts conducted by older adults for seniors (e.g., Karwalajtys *et al.* 2009; Li 2012; UNDP and UNV 2011). Recent literature in various cultural settings has begun to point to distinctive strengths that senior volunteers can bring to aged beneficiaries, as well as to certain benefits that accrue for senior volunteers in working with the aged (e.g., Wheeler *et al.* 1998; Klinedinst and Resnick 2014). In that vein, this analysis offers perspectives from older volunteers themselves concerning the meanings, benefits, and challenges of seniors serving elders aging in place. In that younger adults thus far have not been drawn in great numbers to volunteering or careers in gerontological services, it is important to examine what older adult volunteers can bring to the table. Finally, this analysis joins recent efforts that aim to show that an aging society does not just mean a demographic crisis or added burden, but it also entails potential for older adults to bring promising

new contributions and developments to society (Beard et al. 2012; HelpAge International 2015).

In analyzing my data, I focus on the following interrelated research questions: How do older adult Chinese volunteers view their experience of doing NGO-based volunteer work in service to seniors aging in place in their neighborhoods? What meanings does their volunteer work hold for them? How does what they say relate to the potential, as well as challenges, of bringing together the productive-aging and the support-for-the-aged agendas? Based on an analysis of interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, I argue that the expressed experiences of older adult Shanghai volunteers demonstrate that, in a variety of ways, these volunteers simultaneously bring special strengths as older adults to their service in support of community elders, and they also derive distinctive benefits from their choice to serve community members of advanced age. This pairing of older volunteers with senior community recipients has demonstrated excellent potential, as well as some important challenges.

Methods

The data for this analysis were collected during fieldwork that I conducted in Shanghai starting in 2012. Shanghai is the city in China with the oldest population, with over 20 % of residents over the age of sixty (Zhou and Yin 2014), making it a prime site for examining social adaptations to population aging. In addition, Shanghai has been designated a world age-friendly city (老年友好城市) and is a key player at the forefront of social innovation in China, with a great deal of third-sector and volunteer activity (UNDP and UNV 2011). This research grew out of a larger project on family-based caregiving in Shanghai that I conducted through a Fulbright research award (Shea and Zhang 2016). During this time I began to explore community-based supports for the aged and their caregivers, including the work of older adult volunteers.

Through my social networks, I identified two non-governmental organizations in Shanghai with older adult volunteers working within community-based projects supporting aging in place for ailing elders and their family caregivers. Both were located in naturally occurring retirement communities (NORCs) in which residents had aged in place. These communities were both lower-middle-income communities with a high proportion of elderly residents. To protect human subjects, precise geographic locations will not be specified. After gaining permission from NGO leaders and informing volunteers of my research interests and securing their voluntary consent, informal conversations gave way to more formal research. Approved by the institutional review board at the University of Vermont, this research was conducted over three consecutive summers from 2012 to 2014.

Altogether, I researched the views of 24 older-adult volunteers in these two NGOs. These volunteers ranged in age from their early 50s to their mid-70s. Each was no longer engaged in formal paid employment, either due to retirement or being laid off from work. All were involved in community-based service to local seniors living at home in their neighborhoods. Through informal conversations, formal interviews, group discussions, and shadowing, I focused on what their experiences as volunteers helping local seniors meant to them. I interacted with the volunteers for several months in 2012 and for several weeks in the two subsequent summers. Informal conversation

and small and large focus group discussions of their volunteer experiences were conducted with all 24 volunteers. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with six volunteers, and I shadowed eleven volunteers as they conducted their service activities visiting the homes of ailing neighborhood elders and family caregivers. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio recorded, and the observational data was captured in fieldnotes.

Data was analyzed using the grounded method of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim into Chinese characters. These transcripts, together with fieldnotes on informal conversations and participant observation, were then coded with key words in relation to the research questions above. Coded transcripts and fieldnotes were then read in full and searched for themes, patterns and linkages. Excerpts were then grouped under thematic headings, with further analytical coding. In order to retain cultural nuance in the translation process, I waited until the time of analytical write-up to translate my Chinese language sources into English. To supplement my own fluency in Chinese, I consulted a native speaker whenever translation questions arose. For confidentiality purposes, all information identifying individual volunteers and the particular NGOs and their geographical locations in Shanghai was stripped from the data prior to write-up. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Research Findings

Below I lay out my ethnographic data on the potential and limitations of community-based senior volunteers supporting aging in place in Shanghai. The analysis examines characteristics of the Shanghai volunteers, the nature of their neighborly home visits, their sense of volunteer identity, special strengths they brought to their volunteer work, distinctive benefits they gleaned as older volunteers, and challenges they faced in serving community seniors. While the analysis takes an interpretive approach (Geertz 1997), focusing on perspectives expressed by the volunteers themselves, it also incorporates insights gained through observations with an eye to issues of social context, social reciprocity, and social change.

By way of background, several national government policies on aging are important contextual forces shaping the environment of civil society volunteerism for and by older adults in China today. These include the 1996 and 2013 Elder Protection Law (Standing Committee 1996, 2013), the 2006 White Paper on the Development of China's Undertakings for the Aged (State Council 2006), the 2000 and 2011 Decisions on Strengthening Work on Aging (Central Committee and State Council 2000, 2011a), and the 2011 and 2016 Plans for Development of China's Undertakings for the Aged (State Council 2011b, 2016). Overall, these policies focus much more on social support for the aged than on their productive aging contributions (see Shea, forth.). The right of seniors to continue to contribute to and participate in society receives far more emphasis than the potential utility of older adults as valuable human capital. When volunteering by older adults is mentioned, the work of a small minority of highly skilled retired professionals on special trips to impoverished regions outside their home communities through the Silver Hair Action Initiative (银龄行动) gets the spotlight, rather than the non- or semi-skilled contributions of older citizens working in

their own communities. When it surfaces in policy, volunteering like that of my research subjects is glossed very briefly as a form of local mutual aid. Departing from an earlier tendency to focus solely on the roles of family and government in supporting the aged, these documents do bring up the importance of the non-familial non-governmental sector. However, such policies do not engage the distinctive benefits and challenges of third sector participation of older adults serving older neighbors.

Description of the Volunteers

Engaged in community-based service to home-dwelling seniors in their own neighborhoods, the two dozen older-adult NGO volunteers who I studied ranged in age from their early 50s to age 74, the customary cutoff for formal volunteering in China. Called “young-old volunteers” (低龄志愿者, or 年轻老人志愿者), most were in their 60s, and all but two were female. All of the volunteers were no longer engaged in formal paid employment, either due to having retired on time at about age 60, been forced to retire early in their 50s in earlier waves of downsizing, or having been laid off in their 40s or 50s.

Hitting midlife during a time of rapid socioeconomic and technological change, early cleavage from waged labor was common for these volunteers. Born between 1938 and 1957, these volunteers had had their educational and career opportunities curtailed and cut short during their young adulthood within the radical socialist era of Mao Zedong. Entering the market reform era in their mid-20s to early 40s, these volunteers were born too early to take advantage of the vast majority of promising new educational, training, and career paths that gradually opened up in the reform era from the 1980s onward. Although both men and women in these cohorts experienced early departure from waged labor, women were especially hard hit by this generational challenge and thus formed a large proportion of the volunteers.

These volunteers did not belong in the category of highly skilled professionals that get the spotlight in much of Chinese policy mention of senior volunteering. Instead, their former occupations ranged from factory worker in various manufacturing plants, to human resources manager in a not particularly profitable state-owned enterprise, to low level cadre in a neighborhood residents' committee. About half of the volunteers had been low-level cadres in a neighborhood residents' committee, performing a wide variety of functions to implement state policy at the grassroots level and assist low income residents before needing, themselves, to retire at age 60. Most of the rest of the volunteers had volunteered with a residents' committee at some time after stopping waged labor. All were interested in trying a new kind of volunteering in China's emerging NGO social service sector, which they perceived as having more modern specialized knowledge of gerontological issues in comparison with residents' committees.

Most of the volunteers had been recommended to the NGOs by their residents' committee based on past community service. These NGOs were a good fit for these volunteers, because, unlike the elite Silver Hair Action program, their focus was on providing simple home visits to chat, express caring and concern, and provide basic health and caregiving information and referrals to social services. While it was too late for these volunteers to achieve President Xi Jinping's “Chinese dream” to be wealthy and successful, volunteering in later life gave them the chance to achieve something

and as Newendorp (2016) put it, “compensate” for their social “devaluation” as cohorts left behind by development.

Volunteering in an NGO but with strong connections to the local residents’ committee helped the volunteers to gain community members’ trust. Widespread rumors and news stories of official corruption or neglect and of private sector for-profit and nonprofit scams have rendered contemporary China a place in which public social trust is very low (Yan 2011). The volunteers’ intermediate position between civil society and government was beneficial in overcoming suspicions. Depending on whether any given older resident was feeling more confidence in governmental or nongovernmental actors at any given time, the volunteers could mold their message to fit that resident’s preference, by emphasizing working closely with the residents’ committee or being managed by an NGO or just being a concerned neighbor.

Neighborhood Home Visits and Sense of Volunteer Identity

A large part of the service activity of these older adult volunteers involved friendly visits to frail seniors and their family caregivers living in their own homes in the same communities in Shanghai in which the volunteers themselves dwelled. Sometimes the volunteers already knew the neighbors with whom they were matched, and other times they did not come to know them until after they began to volunteer. Volunteers were matched by the NGO with five or more households to visit on a weekly basis, exclusive of holidays and vacations. Their volunteer work was not eligible for an hourly wage or formal stipend, however, there were frequent opportunities to earn modest per diem expense coverage or extra piecework money on the side. The opportunities came through special projects to support community-based aging in place contracted to the NGO by the Shanghai government or by research institutions, helping to supplement the volunteer’s restricted retirement benefits in the face of rapid inflation.

Volunteer training in preparation for these home visits did not attempt to inculcate the volunteers with highly technical or instrumental skills. Instead, the volunteers were briefed on how to listen well and convey a deep sense of caring and respect for the elders they visited and on self-help measures for health promotion and disease prevention activities that older individuals could do themselves. They were also given tips for managing the challenges of home-based caregiving to share with family caregivers. In addition, they were reminded of who should be contacted in case various problems arose, including the residents’ committee for questions about benefits or family disputes and the numbers for ambulance and police services in case of emergency. They were encouraged to refer seniors to such formal services for any information or needs that were beyond the purview of the volunteers.

Home visits to seniors were initiated by the NGOs themselves in their early days, but such activity was scaled up in 2012 when the Shanghai Municipal government instituted the experimental “Senior Companions program” (老伙伴计划). Inspired by a similar program in Hong Kong, the Senior Companions program in Shanghai provided funding for organizations to have each of their older volunteers be matched with five home-dwelling community elders for an in-person visit about once a week. Volunteers often referred to this as the “one-on-one” (一对一, the original name) or the five-by-one (五对一, new name encompassing the original) program, because the visits were personal visits by one volunteer to individual households, and each volunteer was

responsible for five households. To clarify, the Shanghai program must be distinguished from the U.S. program by the same name, which unlike in Shanghai, offers help with instrumental tasks and errands in addition to conversational companionship.

The NGOs continued their own pre-existing home visit practices while also adding on some Senior Companions activity. Under both NGO and Senior Companions guidelines, the households receiving home visits needed to have one elderly member who was in some way frail, sick, or disabled. Health conditions of those visited range the gamut, from high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, COPD, cancer, arthritis, diabetes, kidney disease, blindness, Parkinson's, dementia, and so on. Beyond that, NGOs had more flexible guidelines for visiting the elderly than did the residents' committees. For attention from residents' committee cadres, one had to reach age 80 or old-old age (高龄老人) before becoming eligible. Due to limited staffing, visits by cadres from the residents' committee (associated with the *laoling wei* 老龄委 under the Ministry of Civil Affairs) are reserved for disabled, sick, or frail seniors age 80 and older who are indigent, widowed, and childless, collectively known as "all-alone elderly in difficulty" (有困难的孤老). NGO volunteers had more discretion in determining need for home visits and focused on visiting those folks that cadres could not. As a result, NGO volunteers visited households with ailing seniors with spouses to care for them but no children living near enough or with the time or capability to help them, which were known as "pure-old" families (纯老家庭). NGO volunteers also visited frail seniors who lived alone (独居老人) and had children nearby to care for them but who were nonetheless struggling. They also visited seniors who had lost their only child (失独家庭) so as to comfort them, and they visited disabled seniors (残疾老人) or sick older adults (有病老人) as young as age sixty. As a result, sometimes the volunteers were of a similar age or even a bit younger than the recipients of their visits, in which case they reframed it as "healthy old people visiting old people with a lot of illnesses" (健康老人看看病多老人). In addition, while the government focused on the sick senior as recipient of visits, the NGOs had more latitude to recognize their role in supporting family caregivers. Such flexibility of NGOs to work outside of rigid rules when the situation called for it was a key advantage. NGO leaders estimated that each of their respective social communities (社区) had almost 1000 older folks who could benefit from home visits, but neither community was anywhere near to reaching all of them yet.

With a usual per-volunteer caseload of 5 to 25 households, NGO volunteers were charged with expressing caring concern (关心) in one-on-one visits, as well as with serving as informational conduits between home-dwelling elders and other parts of the community, including NGOs and residents' committees. Distinguishing themselves from government, market, and professionals, the volunteers were not supposed to do household chores, perform instrumental physical care tasks, provide material support, expound on government policy, run errands, attempt expert care or first aid, or try to promote or sell any products. Instead they were charged with focusing on providing neighborly emotional support and connecting their matches to high quality health information and social service referrals. When called for, volunteers would also communicate needs from below to the NGO and/or residents' committee.

Reflecting this division of labor and sense of identity, volunteers called each other, and were generally called by the elders they visited, Teacher So-and-So (老师), an appellation used as a general term of respect, not to indicate that they had been school teachers. This term of respect helped to distinguish the volunteers as having a higher

and more respected social status than paid hourly domestic workers (钟时工) or nannies (保姆, 阿姨). In describing their identity and role, the volunteers were keen to distinguish themselves from such low status home helpers. As one volunteer, who I will call Teacher Guo (郭老师), a pseudonym, put it:

“We are volunteers. Our thing is expressing caring concern. We do not do tasks. We don’t do housework or change diapers. We are there to give loving concern” (我们是志愿者。我们这个做是关爱的。我们不是做的。我们不是做家务的, 不是换尿布的。我们是关爱的)

This division of labor with volunteers specializing in communicating caring concern had several reasons behind it. One was not wanting to step on the toes of government. The Shanghai government’s territory included providing old age pensions and special subsidies to various categories of low income old-old persons (低保老人, 那保老人) and providing primary health care through community health centers. Policy was too complex and changes therein too frequent for volunteers to present themselves as experts on it, and they were cautioned about the possible risks of misinforming people. In addition, there was the issue of social status. When performed by non-kin, instrumental tasks like housework, running errands, and physical care like bathing, feeding, dressing, grooming, transferring, and toileting were generally considered the work of low-skilled low-pay labor often done by low-status migrant workers, as nannies (保姆) or hourly workers (小时工, 钟点工). There was also concern about creating unrealistic expectations or dependency on volunteers on the part of seniors, their children or the residents’ committee, or irritating the residents’ committee or adult children by showing them up and making them look bad. Finally, there was the issue of risk. Volunteers were not trained in physical care tasks or health care provision. The volunteer and the NGO could be held liable if something were to go wrong or an elder were to die if a volunteer gave instrumental care. But offering emotional support and recommending information and contacts was considered to be safely within the realm of ordinary visiting.

Strengths and Benefits: Senior Volunteers Supporting Aging in Place in Shanghai

Overall, the volunteers emphasized a positive resonance between productive aging and social support for the aged and between serving their own self-interest and providing benefits for others. They talked at length about how they as older volunteers brought special strengths to their work in service to neighborhood seniors in need, and how they themselves derived distinctive benefits from volunteering in service to aged community members. Older adults volunteering in service to the elderly acted as a symbolic salve for Shanghai seniors, both serving and being served, all of whom had, to one extent or another, been left behind by development in comparison with younger generations. The volunteers felt that helping the deserving elderly had the added result of bringing benefits to themselves and that self-cultivation as volunteers had the side benefit of rendering them more helpful to other seniors in need.

Special Strengths of Older Adult Community Volunteers Volunteering generally works best, for both volunteers and service recipients, when volunteers are both motivated by at least some degree of altruistic intent toward the service population

and possess some modicum of aptitude for the type of service work that they will be doing. The Shanghai volunteers expressed several ways in which their motivations and aptitudes as older adults allowed them to bring distinctive strengths to their work with aged community members, due to a combination of their advancing age, their generational and community-based experience, and their social maturity.

Sentiments of True Caring and Substantive Respect The volunteers emphasized that they truly cared (真正地关爱) about each of the elders they were serving, in part due to their own or their own family members' advancing age. They could relate. They did not just see the neighbors they visited as generic old people, but, rather, as people with their own life stories and individual needs and preferences (有自己的故事,有自己的需求). For many of the volunteers, this was because they themselves had parents or older relatives who were of a similar age and/or enduring similar health problems. For example, Teacher Kang (康老师) said, "I think of them as like my mother or father" (我想着他就像我妈我爸). For many, it was also because of their own advancing age. They could see that not long in the future they themselves would be in a similar position. For example, several of the volunteers noted things like: "In reality, I am old, too" (其实我也老了). "I am going to get old, too" (我也要老). "I myself am going to get old someday" (自己本身还要老了). "I'm healthy now, but in the future who knows? I might also have health problems" (我现在健康可是将来说不定我也会出问题). As a result of this realization, they felt that they could see something of their own lives in that of the seniors they visited, making them feel a sense of "deep intimacy" (很亲切).

Being an effective volunteer visitor, they felt, meant not just caring about older people, but also feeling respect for them (尊敬), so that your care was expressed in a spirit of empathy (同情) among equals, not pity (不要可怜他们). As perhaps most generations do, the Shanghai volunteers felt that their generation was much more respectful to others and the elderly than younger generations were. They said that because of receiving traditional Confucian teachings from their own parents and grandparents, their generation had been taught how to really pay attention to the needs of others and to the needs of the elderly in particular. Due to modernization, they said, young people today did not receive that same kind of socialization. Beyond that, they said that they respected the elders they served not just in an abstract sense of the elderly should be respected, but in a concrete sense, having gone through much of the same difficult twentieth-century Chinese history themselves. As one volunteer said, "They really, really suffered" (他们真正地受苦了). Having shared a history of hard work and hardship to build the country, the volunteers felt that they were able to understand where the seniors they served were coming from and to better empathize with their troubles than youth could.

True Desire to Help Others in Need The volunteers also said that they wanted to really help (真正地帮助) these elders, because they were truly in need and deserving of help. They said that they did not want to just make a show of helping them, unlike some other more prominent volunteer activity in contemporary China. For example, they contrasted their own service with examples of the volunteering of mainly younger people at fancy events like the Shanghai Expo, which they felt were easy volunteer jobs, mainly for show, and not in service to people living in hard conditions. The volunteers felt very proud that they could already see that they were making a real

difference by improving community relationships in a way that was beneficial to these older people through the simple ages-old practice of extending neighborly kindness. As Teacher Cao (曹老师) remarked, with great pride:

“Through the model of traditional mutual aid among neighbors, we have helped old people and strengthened relationships throughout the neighborhood” (其实是看到了自己的作用。我们用传统的邻里互助的模式帮助老人,维护了邻里关系).

Ability to Persevere The volunteers also said that their own earlier generational experience with leading a relatively simple life and enduring a lot of hard work and hardship also helped them to persevere in their volunteer work with seniors. For example, one of the volunteer team leaders, Teacher Ren (任老师), remarked that older volunteers tended to stick it out for a long time, whereas younger volunteers like college students felt that visiting old people was too monotonous (太平凡), leading them to become bored. In the short term, she and other older volunteers felt that younger volunteers were less reliable about showing up and being on time and less sustainable in that they often quit after a short time. Teacher Ren also observed that this was the case even with social work majors, adding wryly, “Society and social work are two entirely different things” (社会和社会工作是两回事). By this, she was referring to the fact that many social work majors attending college now in China go into that discipline in the hopes of getting a well-endowed office job, not in order to traipse through low income communities to visit poor sick old people living in substandard conditions. As a result, they felt that social work majors and graduates they met often had a different orientation to their role in tackling social problems which was much more macro and less intimate and hands-on than the home visits work the volunteers were doing.

Finding their Niche The volunteers expressed a sense that, in focusing on neighborly visits to seniors, they had carved out a niche that they, as older local laypersons, were particularly well-suited. They saw it as deliberate specialization to leverage their unique strengths. As Teacher Jin (金老师) said:

“You don’t want to go and try to take the place of social workers. You don’t want to try to do the work of the residents’ committee. You don’t want to also finish up the work of the hairdresser. If you try to do it all, you won’t do a good job” (你不要去代替社工,你不要去代替居委会的事情,把理发师的事情也干完了,全干就不好了).

In fact, the volunteers often said that they felt that no one could perform the kind of neighborly visiting service to the elderly as well as they could. They felt that they did it better not only than younger volunteers, but also better than many professionals and some cadres. This was in part because most professionals and cadres were much younger than these volunteers, and so they had much less experience working with older or low-income people, and living and working in the local community. While lacking degrees, qualifications, and formal positions, the volunteers had intimate long-term local knowledge of older generations and of the local community that younger working people lacked. They also felt that they provided something that seniors’ adult

children or hourly workers could not provide. Because the volunteers did not have the practical and monetary entanglements that children and domestic help had, they could focus their full attention on listening and expressing a sense of caring. So, within the niche of neighborly home visits that they had carved out, these older adult community volunteers saw no rivals.

Social Maturity and Social Skills The volunteers also felt that their social maturity helped them to do a much better job than younger people at using their social skills to put themselves into the shoes of their host and convey a sense of respect, dignity, and appreciation for them. On this social maturity theme, volunteer leader Teacher Guo (郭老师) said, “First one needs to learn how to be a person, and only then go out to do things in the world” (人先要学会怎么做人再做事), meaning that you need basic values and social skills in place before trying to do volunteer or formal work outside your own family. The older volunteers told stories of having to teach young volunteers who came to their NGOs how to be polite and respectful during a home visit. This included not saying things or engaging in behavior that would cause the elderly to feel that they or their home was being looked down upon. Part of this was knowing not to refuse the seniors’ extensions of hospitality. As Teacher Lin (林老师) said:

“When we train young volunteers, sometimes we have to tell them, “It doesn’t matter whose home you visit, you should not first inspect the chair before sitting in it. If there is a chair, then you should sit in it. If it’s dirty, then wait until you get outside their house where they can’t see you to wipe off your clothes!” (到任何家里,不要看椅子坐位子,有椅子就坐下去,脏了到外面他们看不见的地方去拍衣服).

Along similar lines, another senior volunteer Teacher Liang (梁老师) noted with incredulity elements of basic etiquette which young volunteers needed to be taught: “If they offer you something to drink, you shouldn’t refuse it because you think their cups might be dirty” (他们要是给你什么喝的东西,你不要应为显得杯子脏而拒绝他). Similarly, Teacher Lin complained that even after you tell them, many young volunteers often don’t even realize that this kind of behavior is insulting: “They are not yet able to put themselves in the place of others. They are not mature yet” (他们还不会替别人想。他们还不成熟).

While such remarks about the social immaturity of youth are found in many parts of the world, the Chinese volunteers added a local historical dimension to their commentary. Younger generations of student volunteers had not experienced the kind of material deprivation that these older generations of lower and lower middle income seniors had experienced over their lifetimes. Most current college-aged volunteers came from upper middle and higher socioeconomic echelons, and their market reform era lives had not necessitated development of sensitivity for the subjectivity of those with less means. Further, due to the strict family planning regime from the 1980s until 2015, the vast majority of these young volunteers were single children who, even if they were not spoiled by doting parents and grandparents, had much less practice observing social cues and adjusting their behavior in consideration for others.

Distinctive Benefits to Older Adult Volunteers By providing friendly home visits to aged neighbors, older adult volunteers accrue some distinctive benefits, in addition to

positive dimensions shared by volunteers of all ages serving many different demographics in diverse ways, such as becoming part of something larger than themselves. While the Shanghai volunteers saw their volunteer work as very beneficial to the elderly neighbors who they served, they saw it as even more beneficial to themselves as older volunteers. This is important, because it has become a well-known reality of volunteering worldwide that in order to attract, motivate, develop, and retain volunteers, it is necessary to appeal to volunteers' sense of self-interest.

Some of the main service activity benefits of which the Shanghai volunteers spoke included: happiness gained from seeing their labors help a group of others in need, feeling pleased at receiving expressions of gratitude and social recognition, gaining new knowledge and skills helpful to their personal development and family lives, gaining perspective on their own struggles in life, and having the chance to try to improve their own family and community. While these benefits are not limited to gerontological service, the volunteers linked these benefits to being an older adult serving aged neighbors.

Socially Valued Role in Community after Losing Paid Jobs Being volunteers gave these older men and women a role beyond the family and socially valued things to do in the community at a time when they were no longer considered employable in the paid economy. The volunteers expressed great pleasure at the way in which their service to seniors allowed them to earn appreciation and recognition from community residents, seniors, and local government: This was important because like many people in their generational cohorts, they felt a collective sense of having had insufficient opportunities to cultivate themselves and achieve distinction during their younger years. The volunteers spoke with satisfaction of the added respect they were given as a function of their achievements as volunteers in this critical area of helping with the graying population. For example, Teacher Tang (唐老师) relayed her sense that:

“Compared with before, I receive more respect [in the community], because they know that [now] I am a volunteer. I am serving the elderly, I am serving the community. We have received the recognition of old folks in the community, and we have received recognition from [community] leaders. They have witnessed the contributing spirit of us volunteers!” (比以前受人尊重了,知道你是志愿者,为老人服务,为社区服务。我们得到社区老年朋友的认可,也得到领导的认可。他们都看到我们志愿者的奉献精神).

Similarly, but going beyond just respect from the community, some volunteers were moved by the reciprocal expressions of caring concern that they received from residents. For example, volunteer leader Teacher Ren was impressed by the outpouring of concern from residents when she herself experienced the onset of a chronic illness the previous year:

“I feel the recognition very deeply. Like last year, I was sick for a long time. They [old folks in the neighborhood] all came to see me. Twenty or more people came to see me. So many people from the community came to see me. I was so moved by their kindness! This demonstrated that because I often help a lot of other people, when I was sick other people came to see me. This was a big comfort to

me. It was very validating. Through this, I received old folks' recognition of me and my efforts. I felt very satisfied and pleased. So now what I feel most happy about is that old folks in the community have given me a big thumbs up. Our [community] leaders are also very supportive and were very concerned about me. About this, I feel very happy!" (这个事有的,像我去年下半年一直不舒服,他们都来看我的,几十个人来看我,社区好多人来看我,我心里过意不去了。这个也说明一点,因为我在平时帮助了很多人,我生病了别人也来看我,对我也是一个安慰,很认可的,我得到老年人对我的认可,我也感到很满足很欣慰。所以我们现在感到高兴的就是社区的老人们对我们很赞扬的,我们领导对我们也是很支持很关心的,这点我们就很开心).

Teacher Ren's remarks also address the way in which the volunteers appreciated the rich web of social ties that their volunteerism afforded them. Like Ren, the volunteers stressed how the relationships that they formed with fellow volunteers and with the older residents they served were imbued with genuine mutual caring, rather than merely being instrumental connections. This gave them a feeling that their community had become like a large family in which they played an essential and appreciated role.

Gaining Perspective on Their Own Personal and Family Struggles Volunteering with elderly folks with serious health problems and/or significant caregiving responsibilities also helped to put the volunteers' own struggles into perspective. Serving seniors in need heightened their gratefulness for the health, resources, and freedom they enjoyed. In those volunteers with health problems and family caregiving duties of their own, their volunteer experiences helped to stimulate a feeling of suffering together with fellow travelers. Rather than focusing on lost youth or their misfortune in comparison with today's youth, their focus on local elders in need stimulated feelings of gratitude for their own relative good fortune. As noted by Teacher Feng (冯老师), "This [the fact that I can volunteer] is a sign of my good fortune. It says that my health is good, and I have the ability to do service for [other] old people" (这是我的福气,说明我身体好,有能力为老人服务).

The act of serving other seniors and their family caregivers also sometimes ironically provided emotional respite to volunteers who were primary caregivers for their own family members. For example, volunteering provided a breath of fresh air to one volunteer who was the primary caregiver for her own mother who was very ill and prone to showering complaints on her daughter. Getting out of the house and interacting with other caregivers and other ailing seniors who were kind to her bolstered her spirits to go back home and not let her mothers' sharp tongue get to her as much. In helping non-kin, there was more appreciation and fewer expectations. After telling about how her elderly mother constantly critiqued her methods of housework and caregiving, this volunteer, Teacher Yi (易老师), said:

"One thing [about volunteering] is that it made me feel like in existing I have [social] worth. The other thing is that I feel like these old folks have taken me as one of their own people. I can exchange experiences with them. They let me help them. When I help them, I feel very glad in my heart." (一个是觉得自己有价值存在,另一个觉得老人他们把你当自己人,你可以和他们交流,可以帮助他们,帮助他们我觉得心里很快乐).

Whereas family caregiving was experienced as an obligation with high external expectations, volunteer assistance was viewed as a gift made out of choice, which usually led to a high degree of mutual appreciation, with the volunteer grateful for being trusted by non-family and the elderly residents and their families grateful for any small acts of non-familial kindness. This also underscores how their volunteering activities were usually mutually seen as primarily relational, as opposed to transactional.

Gaining new Knowledge and Skills for Personal Development and Family Care Learning from community residents' experiences of aging and caregiving was a further dimension that made their service work with the elderly highly rewarding for the volunteers. Their volunteer experiences gave the volunteers anticipatory socialization for their own and their families' aging processes. Through their volunteer training and interacting with their home-visit matches, the older Shanghai volunteers learned health and caregiving knowledge and skills for their own personal health maintenance and for any current or future caregiving they did for their own elderly family members. As Teacher Yi (易老师) reflected:

“The today of these old folks is my tomorrow. After doing this [volunteer] stuff, I have raised my knowledge level a lot, and this is also useful to me personally.”
(他们那些老人的今天也就是我们的明天,做了这个东西以后我也提高了很多的知识,对自己也很有用。)

By helping older community members explore options for nursing home care, the volunteers are also able to gather information in case they themselves needed it for their own futures. As Teacher Lin said:

“After volunteering in this area, now I purposefully observe how people manage their support and care in old age. Now I have a deep concern for things related to old age support. Whenever I hear of a good nursing home, I take some old folks from our community to go see it. Because I'm also old, and I need to develop [my knowledge] in this area, because I may need to move into [a nursing home] later in life. So now I go to understand the situation, which places are pretty good and convenient, which I could accept and move into.” (做了志愿者以后,我专门看人家养老,对养老这块相当关心,有好的养老院我就带我们社区的老人去看。因为我们自己也老了,我要向这方面发展了,以后要住进去的,现在去了解,哪个地方便宜还好,我能承受就进去了)。

Chosen, Balanced Middle Path The ability to freely admit self-interest is an important modern contrast to mass “volunteering” during radical Maoist eras earlier in the lives of these volunteers. In Maoist times, one was supposed to be a selfless “cog in the machine” of the revolution. Narratives common to this era glorified self-sacrifice and putting one's own little family after the needs of the Party, the nation, and the masses. Maoist mass volunteering was voluntary in name only; failure to participate normally resulted in serious consequences. In contrast, the volunteers spoke of modern volunteering as being different in that it was based on a true personal choice, and it involved an open intentional balance between serving others and helping oneself. As one of the volunteer team leaders Teacher Guo said:

“They [the volunteers] themselves are old. They also have older and younger people in their families that they need to take care of. They need to make a priority of taking care of their own family matters first [before volunteer matters]” (他们自己也老,他们上有老下有,家里肯定要搞好).

In this way, this new kind of volunteerism was presented as a kind of balanced altruism in which volunteers were encouraged to balance their personal and family lives with a reasonable level of service to others, rather than engage in the extreme self-sacrifice of past times.

Happiness from Seeing Results in a Deserving Group in Need The volunteers were very happy about their decision to serve local seniors. As stated earlier, they felt that the seniors they were serving were a truly deserving group in need of help, which made serving them a pleasure. Just being with them and seeing them happy was a source of joy for the volunteers. For example, Teacher Bai (白老师) said:

“When I am serving old folks, I am happy. I get happiness from the process of doing service for old folks. I feel very satisfied. Why? When old folks are happy, then I feel happy.” (为老人服务我开心,在为老人服务的过程当中我们也得到了开心、满足,为什么?老人开心了我们也开心).

Volunteering with these older folks was especially rewarding in that they did not ask for much and were very appreciative of even small gestures of caring or concern. As Teacher Du (杜老师) said:

“Elderly Chinese people are very simple and guileless. They are not the type to put demands on others. If you just show that you care about him/her, s/he will be very happy. They will thank you and be very polite. Chinese old folks have a very simple and pure character. They feel no need to put any requirements on your service. Well, [from their life experience], and they also know that making demands is not going to get them anything.” (我们中国人的老人很朴实,不会提什么要求,你关心他他很高兴,谢谢你,很客气,中国老人的性格很纯朴的,都不需要提什么条件的,他就知道提出来也享受不到).

In contrast, the volunteers felt that if they were to serve people who were younger, they would be likely to pick faults with their service, as did some of the adult children of the old folks they visited. Given the general appreciativeness of the older generations, volunteers were pleased with their choice to serve seniors who had suffered more than youth and were more grateful.

Opportunity to Catalyze Change in Other Family Members and the Local Community Finally, the volunteers hoped that their service would help to change their own families and community to make them more age-friendly as they themselves got older. They hoped that their volunteer efforts would show others that older people could, and indeed did, contribute a great deal to society and thus deserved to be helped when and if that became needed. They also hoped to serve as an example of service to and advocacy for older people in the hopes that their own family and community

members would take note and follow in their footsteps. As several different volunteers said:

Teacher Wang (王老师): “I say, we will also have a day when we are old. For now, we are serving others, but in the future when we are old, we also hope that there will be people who can serve us.” (我说我们也有老的一天,我们现在为他们服务,将来我们老了也希望有人能够为我们服务).

Teacher Ping (平老师): “When I get old, I hope that other people will also take care of me. It is kind of like I am being a role model. I hope that young people will be like us and help old people in the same way.” (我老了希望别人也照顾我,好像自己做了榜样,希望年轻人他们也会像我们照顾老人一样).

Teacher Tian (田老师): “To care about older old folks, to care about other people. We hope that in the future when we are old that there will also be some people who will show caring concern to us.” (关心年纪老的老年人,关心别人,我们就想到了今后我们老了也有人来关心我们).

Teacher Lin (林老师): “[We want to] be role models. We want to wake our volunteer team’s spirit and make it spread and flourish throughout the community.” (做个榜样. 我们志愿者团队这种精神发扬光大).

In this vein, volunteers said that they thought that if neighbors and local leaders saw them contributing substantially to community eldercare for as long as they were able, then they themselves would be more likely to receive help when and if they needed it. According to Teacher Guo, for example:

“Because I myself will also get old, so now I am working to make a contribution to society. Now I am doing things for others. When I get old, then people will do things for me. This is a mutual thing. It’s like I contribute now, and when I am really old, people will know that I made a contribution, that I have made outstanding achievements. Then if I bring up my difficulties with higher ups, then they are going to think about me and my needs first before someone else’s. Because I contributed a lot.” (因为自己本身还要老了,我现在做的工作贡献,现在是我为人家,我年纪大了人家还要为我了,这个是相互的,就是我付出了,我真的老了,我是做了贡献了,有一定的业绩了,我的困难和上面提,他总是要先考虑到你,因为你付出多了).

While promised no guarantees for community aid in their later years, the volunteers sincerely hoped that in the future their example would inspire others – family, volunteers, or cadres - to serve at least those seniors who had made large contributions to community eldercare during the earlier years of old age.

Challenges of Older Volunteers Serving Community Seniors

Although the older Shanghai volunteers with whom I spoke tended to express very positive sentiments about their volunteer experience and its benefits for the

community, they also had quite a bit to say about the challenges and limitations of their service work. Here I will draw out a few key points that relate to the theme of this article. These challenges include limitations in their ability to serve others as volunteers and limitations in the benefits that the volunteers could accrue from their service work.

Challenges with Regard to their Capabilities as Volunteers Challenges relating to their abilities to serve described by the volunteers centered around themes of facing limits on what they could do and issues of short-term reliability and long-term sustainability, as described below.

Coming up Against Limits on What They Could do As mentioned earlier, these generational cohorts did not tend to have as much formal education as those that followed, and these particular volunteers were not highly educated professionals. While this gave them a common homespun manner that felt warm and approachable to most of the low and lower middle income elders they visited, it also meant that they lacked the professional qualifications or the educational foundation to easily pick up highly technical knowledge and skills. Due to this and NGO concerns about risk and liability, as well as concerns about unsustainable dependence, the volunteers were strongly discouraged by their NGOs from providing technical or instrumental assistance or even venturing into offering in-depth information about policy or programs or health measures. While the volunteers understood and often appreciated these limits, sometimes they regretted not being able to offer more pragmatic immediate assistance or more systemic solutions. Immediate material or instrumental needs sometimes seemed much more pressing than socio-emotional or informational support, and sometimes they could not be sure if a referral might end up in a dead end.

It was often hard to hear people's needs, but not have the skill, power, resources or role to help them in a practical way and instead only to be able to listen, communicate, and report back. As Teacher Du related:

When old folks bring up some problems with me, because we are just volunteers, there are some things for which we cannot satisfy their requests. Some things we can only report to the higher-ups. But as to doing something concretely, we don't have the ability, and we don't have that power. But old folks still like to tell you some things, to share with you some hopes, views, and requests, but some of it we can't help them with. All we can do is find some way to comfort them emotionally or help them to connect with some government unit to ask for information or fetch them some informational pamphlets. That's about it (老人给你提出一些问题,但是我们是志愿者,有些事情我们是不能满足他的要求,有些事情我们只有向上级反映,但是具体要怎样做我们没有这个能力,也没有这个权力。但是老人喜欢跟你说,跟你说一些愿望、想法、要求,但是有些我们还是做不到。我们只能听他们怎么说,我们就用什么方法去安慰他,或者帮助他到什么部门咨询,提供他一些资料,就是这样)。

Although they received some volunteer training lectures from local experts on these topics, they often felt at a loss to adequately assist elderly residents in coping with dementia, depression, or mental illness in themselves or a loved one.

However, there were some exceptions that were made to the no-practical help rule. Sometimes volunteers felt so morally moved by the plight of their elderly neighbors that they felt compelled to transcend role limitations and go out on a limb. Going out on a limb for their aged charges was most likely in the early stages of a volunteer's efforts. For example, Teacher Yi was moved in her early volunteer days to try to find a way to bring an old couple with physical impairments out to the movies. Her efforts were criticized as too risky by the local residents' committee. What if someone fell or died on this escapade, they asked? An officially smiled-upon exception was in the case of the approach of a natural disaster like a hurricane, which Shanghai regularly gets during summers. These NGO volunteers were encouraged, if able, to coordinate with their local residents' committee to help the elders they visited with storm preparation. Some of them would help mobility-challenged residents without nearby kin to stow away or tie down unsecured items and get extra food, water, and radio and flashlight batteries.

Short-Term Reliability and Long-Term Sustainability There were also limits in terms of what these older volunteers could do in both the short term and the long term as a result of their own health issues and family obligations. Although very healthy for their age, some of the volunteers found themselves managing their own acute or chronic health conditions, such as a broken leg, colds, digestive difficulties, or high blood pressure. None of them were financially secure enough to hire regular paid help to do their housework, laundry, grocery shopping, or cooking, or their family care tasks. Most of them also had some of their own family caregiving responsibilities, such as watching a grandchild here or there or assisting their older parents or parents-in-law or other aged relatives. As a result, they had to carefully balance their time between volunteering and taking care of themselves and their family. Volunteers often had their own health or family issues come up, and sometimes they had to call in to reschedule volunteer appointments or beg out of a meeting. As they and their family members advanced in age, unexpected personal health and caregiving issues tended to come up with increasing frequency. Still, however, NGO leaders agreed that the older volunteers tended to be more reliable in terms of showing up and on time than college students did. Time will tell whether this is a maturity issue that will fade away in these younger cohorts as they age, or if it is a widespread long-term generational trait.

Much more than about short-term volunteer commitments, the older Shanghai volunteers worried about issues of the long-term sustainability of their home-visit service work for aged community members. Although they tended to stick with home visits longer than their younger counterparts, the volunteers knew that there will come a time when their own health or their own family caregiving responsibilities or both would make it too hard to volunteer in this capacity any longer. Thinking ahead to the future point at which their generation will no longer be able to carry on this work, they worried about sustainability with future generations. They had a hard time imagining future generations of older people being willing to do so much hard volunteer work without a guaranteed wage. They perceived few young people as being willing to do such community service or capable of doing a good job at it, rather than just going through the motions for external recognition. They attributed this perceived shortcoming of younger generations to the lack of shared values concerning the importance of service to others in general and to the elderly in particular.

Teacher Guo: “There is no one to take up our work after us. Our [volunteer] spirit is terrific. Other people can’t understand why we do it. Other people don’t think the way we do. They see us so busy and they ask, do you get paid for this work? Why else would you be so busy [working]?” (没有接班人。我们精神很好的,人家很想不通的。人家就很不通的。他们看我老开会,老上人家里去,就说你们这个有钱吗?怎么这么忙的?).

Teacher Lin: “Yes, in our lane [the small street where I live], people see me, and they think that I am going to work at a paid job. They all think I’m going to work.” (我们弄堂里走和老人谈心,他们说阿姨你上班去了,都以为我们在上班).

The volunteers felt that they needed government help to find younger people who could join their NGO volunteer group and then take their place as they got too old to provide service. They also worried about how to train younger people so that they would not just take the training and run. Concerned that younger people were not as service-minded as their generation, they feared that younger people might take advantage of skills acquired through volunteer training in order to obtain employment or learn to care for their own family members, without putting in time as a volunteer. As Teacher Guo said:

“We are pretty up there in age, and our experience is limited. When I think of young people taking on our work, I think, how can we give this [responsibility] to them? Because this thing we do, you have to have a loving heart. You have to be really enthusiastic in your love for this work! Now we can take on some apprentices, but as to whether s/he will have this kind of heart and be willing to do this work, I don’t know. If I teach you and you don’t do the work, then I have taught you for nothing! It is hard for us to train someone. To teach them, I have to write some stuff down, at the very least I have to write some tips down to give to them, so that they can understand it a little. And I also have to take them to visit people, and teach them how to communicate properly. If I teach you for three months, and you don’t do the work, then I have taught all that for nothing!” (我们年龄比较大,精力有限。年人接班我怎么交给人家,这个东西要有爱心的,要真正地热爱这份工作。可以带徒弟,但是他要有这份心,愿意做。你不做这个事白交,我们很吃力,我要写东西,最起码要写东西交给他,让他懂一点,还要带他进门,教他们怎么沟通,我教了你三个月,他不做了我白做)。

As a result, the older Shanghai volunteers put much more faith into the current young-old than in the young as possible people to pick up the torch in their wake. Teacher Guo related how he hoped that the government would help their team to find some more young-old people to join their team:

“This work needs to have a government leadership unit to do a bit of recruiting, to find us some old people a bit younger than us, some who, like us, have loving hearts and are willing to make a contribution to society. We need some more old people with responsible hearts to join our team.” (这个工作要政府领导部门做一点动员,帮我们怎么找一点比我们年纪轻的老人,愿意付出爱心的,有责任心的老人加入我们队伍,那就最有利力)。

Looking to government not just for funding but also for recruiting reflects, at least in part, years spent in Mao's collective era when so much hinged on government intervention and independent NGOs were not allowed.

Challenges with Regard to Benefits to the Volunteer Challenges to a positive experience for the volunteer included: difficulty juggling multiple roles, worry over risk and liability, concerns about stepping on toes, problems with entitlement complexes, imbalances in short-term reciprocity, and no guarantees for long-term reciprocity.

Difficulty Juggling Multiple Roles Although all of the volunteers said that they loved their volunteer work and that it brought them many personal benefits, they also said that it could be difficult juggling this work with their own occasional sickness, regular housework, and caregiving obligations to older parents, spouses, children, and/or grandchildren. Volunteers said that there was often too much running around chasing people and sometimes too many meetings. Given their prior socialization during times of Maoist mass mobilization, there was also some concern that some older volunteers could take their service too seriously and sacrifice too much and hurt their own health. Volunteers looked out for one another to try to ensure that no one was taking on too much, but there was often such an enthusiastic fervor that competition to do good could sometimes lead people to overextend, yielding role strain. There were sometimes mixed messages like this one from volunteer leader Teacher Guo who said that you must “take care of yourself and your family first” (先要照顾好自己和家里), but he also said that “when you care for old people [in community volunteer work], you definitely need to care for them fully. Whatever difficulties your own family has, if one of your old folks has a need [for your volunteer services], then you must go out to see them” (关心的老人肯定要关心到位,自己家里再有什么困难,这个老人有需求肯定出来). Beyond positive pressure from the team to render good community service, there was also some pressure from some elderly residents, who, if more than a week went by without a call or a visit, would call to see how their volunteer was doing and to say how much they missed them. Many seniors also pressed volunteers to stay longer than they had planned, because they did not want the visit to end so soon.

Worry Over Risk and Liability Volunteers also worried about risk and liability. If an old person they were visiting had a serious health emergency or died while a volunteer was visiting, there was a concern that their children or other family members might try to blame the volunteer. As a result, volunteers were warned in case of health emergency not to try to handle things on their own. They were instructed to always first call an ambulance and then call the residents' committee so that they could, in turn, contact the elder's children or next of kin. For years in the late reform era, news accounts have been replete with stories of good Samaritans whose good deeds went very badly for them (Yan 2011), making NGOs, residents' committees, and volunteers all gun-shy of sticking out one's neck to help a non-family member when serious health consequences or life and death were involved. While this was not unique to older volunteers, volunteering with the elderly did mean a higher chance of health emergencies than service to younger populations would. In addition, volunteer leaders in the NGOs expressed concerns about the well-being of older volunteers. For example, one

volunteer leader said that he would call and advise his team members to stay home if it was too hot outside or if the weather was otherwise bad. Since those leaders knew and trusted the volunteers, it was not as much a fear of being blamed by the volunteers' family members as it was a sense of responsibility for keeping their volunteers safe.

Concerns about Stepping on Toes Volunteers also worried about the need to be careful not to do such a good job as to show up the residents' committee or the seniors' adult children. If the volunteers raised expectations too high, this could cause senior residents to complain or make extra demands of local cadres or adult children, causing annoyance. As a result, the volunteers found themselves needing to reconcile their own ideals with what they viewed as the lower standards of younger generations of working adults. Quotes from two volunteers illustrate this point:

Teacher Guo: "If you are too on fire [with your volunteer work], then you are going to step outside the lines, and once you step outside the lines, then something untoward is going to happen. One thing is that you are going to get into serious conflicts. The residents' committee is going to be upset with you, and the person's family members are going to be upset with you. I am just a volunteer. If I overstep into the residents' committee's territory, that is not good. It will cause a conflict." (过火要出格的,一出格就出事了。一处是矛盾很厉害,居委对你有看法,家属对你有看法。我是志愿者,我超过了居委的范畴也不好,要引起矛盾的).

Teacher Yi: "You can't do a too good job as a volunteer. If you do, the residents' committee and the children are going to be unhappy. You will have brought them trouble." (做志愿者不要做得太好了。做得太好,居委会和人家孩子会不高兴。你给他带来麻烦).

Problems with Entitlement Complexes While the volunteers found most of the seniors they served easily satisfied, they did receive an undue amount of grief from a small minority of seniors and/or their adult children who felt entitled to supreme service. Some such families assumed that the volunteers were cadres employed by the residents' committee who had an obligation to help them with material benefits. Some families confused the volunteers with the contracted wage laborers that the Shanghai government paid to provide a couple hours of housekeeping service each month per senior over age 80 and insisted that they do some housework. Some misunderstood a one-time favor, such as bringing over some breakfast or delivering a utility bill payment, as an ongoing obligation. It was often very stressful to decline these requests or demands and to once again delineate their role boundaries. Beyond this minority of entitled residents, sometimes there were some residents' committee cadres who asked volunteers to do too many things for free that a "residents' committee cadre was being paid to do." Given that the NGO and the volunteers depended on the good graces of the residents' committee and their superiors in the government in order to be able to operate, this required delicate communication and situational flexibility.

Imbalances in Short-Term Reciprocity With limited resources and no formal employment living in a very expensive city, most of the volunteers were motivated at least

to some extent by the extra side opportunities for perks or added piecework income that came with connection to an NGO, which had access to government contracts and other project funds. Since these material benefits were irregular, sometimes a feeling of imbalanced exchange would creep in among volunteers during leaner periods. Sometimes they felt that they were even busier than they had been before they left the waged work force, and yet this gig offered no regular pay. Sometimes they spent their own money for little gifts for home visits, when there was no project grant available at the time to cover such things. While the volunteers like to emphasize with pride that their work was not hourly waged labor and that the reimbursements and piecework money that they did get paled in comparison to the experience of contributing to the wellbeing of the community, these material side benefits were nonetheless an important piece of the picture.

No Guarantee of Long Term Reciprocity As we heard above, the volunteers hoped that through their example, they might elicit help for themselves later in life from their family, community, or resident's committee: While they hoped to build up good will for reciprocal care in case they needed help later, as Chen et al. (2016) stated of her paid caregivers, the Shanghai volunteers could only hope, but not feel sure, that they would be similarly cared for in old age. Beyond spouses, the volunteers felt uncertain that anyone would care for them in old age, whether their own children or local volunteers.

Teacher Jiang (江老师): “We are worried about our future. Because we don't know when we ourselves may someday get sick. Right now old folks who are 80 or 90 years old, they have a lot of children, so they are very fortunate! They are more fortunate than we are [in terms of having a lot of family], and they also have us to express caring concern for them. But when we get to their age, our children will all be very busy, and they will not be likely to care about us anymore.” (我们担心我们未来,因为我们不知道自己什么时候生病。现在80、90多岁的老人,他们子女很多,他们很幸福,比我们幸福,还要我们关心他。等我们这个时间,下一代都是很忙的,不可能再关心我们了)。

Teacher Guo (郭老师): “Young volunteers are not reliable like we are. What we really wish is that the government would make great efforts to advance careers in gerontological work. Then we would be able to relax [about our future].” (年轻志愿者不像我们那么可靠。我们就希望政府要下大力量把老人事业搞上去,我们就轻松了)。

As a result, the volunteers had hope for but serious doubts about the long-term viability of pure reliance on older volunteers, especially as later generations without their collective spirit became old.

Discussion

The Shanghai data shows a great deal of promise for older volunteers helping to support aging in place, as well as important limitations. While emphasizing the positives, the Shanghai volunteers spoke of both upsides and downsides of their

volunteer work. While they primarily spoke of various forms of role enhancement and community improvement, they also mentioned sources of role strain and non-sustainable aspects of trying to develop age-friendly communities in the current milieu. In many ways, both the positives and the negatives expressed by the older volunteers in Shanghai echo many of the findings on older adult volunteer programs in other settings. Common positive findings include the heightened sense of purpose experienced by many older volunteers and the improved quality of life noted by both older volunteers and their aged clients (UNDP and UNV 2011). Common concerns include worries about juggling too many responsibilities (e.g., Butler 2006) and sustainability over time (e.g., Henderson 2009; Shenk and Mahon 2009; Stafford 2009). While China's seniors have their own historical reasons for concern, doubts about younger generations are also a common theme in many settings.

Some western scholarly analysts have recently expressed concern about seniors being enticed into serving as cheap or free labor by exploitative neoliberal programs involving government devolution of responsibility for public welfare (e.g., Muehlebach 2012). While concerns about exploitation of senior volunteers, especially those of modest means with self-care and family care needs of their own, are important to heed, thus far it appears that for these Shanghai volunteers, the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. At the same time, the volunteers did not seem naïve to the issue in that they did bring up the ongoing need for government support for volunteer project funding and recruitment and professional caregiver training. Beyond this study, there is evidence from research on senior volunteer programs in western countries which supports the view that benefits outweigh drawbacks, even for seniors with modest resources and caregiving duties of their own. For example, Dulin and Hill (2003) assessed the US-based Senior Companions program, in which low-income American seniors provide companionship and practical assistance to elderly neighbors for a modest government-supported stipend. In reporting their findings, Dulin and Hill (2003) noted the controversy, writing that: "It has been argued in the literature that individuals with limited resources may not benefit from altruistic activity" (298). In contrast, their study found that the "participant's level of altruistic activity was significantly associated with positive affect" (298). Extending this finding, Greenfield et al. (2012) has written that recent research in several western countries has found that, rather than feeling exploited, volunteers with family caregiving responsibilities of their own actually benefit even more from volunteering than non-caregivers do.

One important aspect of the experience of both the Shanghai senior volunteers and the US Senior Companions program is that neither relies merely on socioemotional benefits or the distant promise of a more caring society, but, rather, each in their own ways offers volunteers the chance to gain some compensation, in the Shanghai case through limited expense reimbursement and occasional piecemeal work, and in the US case through regular stipends. While global cynicism about "fake" volunteerism has been associated with critiques of volunteers who receive compensation, some researchers have argued that it is a social justice issue that often people on limited incomes are unable to participate in regular community service absent material aid (e.g., Glenton et al. 2010; McBride et al. 2011; South et al. 2014). Thus, even though it does not meet some purists' definitions of volunteerism, it is important for senior volunteer programs to retain modest material incentives for those who need them. As the Shanghai volunteers related, their modest means and the empathy it affords was an important

part of their appeal to the people they serve. Beyond this, it is important to keep in mind that gaining knowledge, building relationships, and enhancing social status are also important to these volunteers. As a result, service learning approaches may be helpful for enhancing attention to the issue of mutually beneficial relationships for both volunteers and those they serve (Lewis 2002), which will in turn boost both quality and sustainability.

While perceiving positives overall, observers of both the Shanghai and the US Senior Companions programs do, however, both note limitations of the initiatives. For example, the Shanghai volunteers had some concerns about their workload and the challenges of juggling so many roles, as discussed earlier. Role strain is something that other studies have found as well. For example, in the US Senior Companions program study in Maine, volunteers talked about taking on too much “to the detriment of their own health and well-being” (Butler 2006: 61). Another similar finding was the feeling among US Senior Companions volunteers and clients alike that “government should do more for elders” (Butler and Eckart 2007) and not leave quite so much up to individual elders, families, and volunteers.

Another significant limitation to the Shanghai senior volunteer efforts occurred after the close of my study. The gentrification of Shanghai (Pan 2011) continues, and by mid-2014 it had reached some of the neighborhoods where the senior volunteers I interviewed lived and volunteered. Over the course of that year, at least a third of the people in one of the communities studied were relocated to the suburbs to make way for high-end real estate and commercial properties. While many residents and volunteers were happy to move to more modern apartments, they worried about their community being broken up. The relocation was not done in such a way as to keep people from the same neighborhood together. As a result, the volunteers’ efforts to create an age-friendly neighborhood were diminished as large parts of the population dispersed to various suburban areas. With so much dislocation, the NGO that operated in that community also left the area in 2015 to focus on service work elsewhere, and they did not follow the relocated residents or volunteers to their new locations. If one is an optimist, one might hope that in dispersing volunteers, the spirit of mutual aid and voluntary assistance to the elderly might spread to new communities. But this ignores the fact that particular relationships built up over time between volunteers and their clients matter, and strong volunteer programs require solid management, not just spirit. Given this, cities which are relocating seniors to the suburbs should make more of an effort to give elderly neighbors the option to relocate to the same place, thus allowing more volunteers to stay with long-term clients. This is especially important in that the type of new high-rise new apartment complexes (高楼) to which dislocated Shanghai seniors are moving are already known to make it more difficult to establish close ties with neighbors than it was in the one-story row-houses (平房) or low-rise work unit buildings (楼房) in which they had lived when residing nearer the city center. In addition, viability requires not just volunteers but also age-friendly systems of volunteer management in the suburbs.

One important aspect of good volunteer management will be to set up systems for raising the probability that senior volunteers will have a better guarantee of return on their volunteer investment. Recently some communities in China have begun to experiment with the social mechanism of time banking, borrowed from western countries. For example, a recent report in the Chinese newspaper *China Daily* stated

that nearby Jiangsu province “is piloting a senior citizen support bank in many communities to find a solution to its increasing problem of caring for” older community members (Wang and Cang 2015). If successful, such time banks can help to not just leave it to chance over time that volunteers may receive volunteer services in return if and when they need them in the future. One important but often overlooked factor will be to find ways to let time banked float across a relatively large geographic area given the ever-increasing incidence of relocation and geographic mobility.

While making important contributions, this study does not address all facets of the important issue of older adult volunteerism in support of seniors. Moving forward, we need more research on this topic in a wider variety of locales. The bit of existing research on senior volunteers serving elders in China (e.g., Li 2012) all come from highly developed urban areas like Shanghai. We need more research on how senior-to-senior community service can be, or is being done, in other places in China, especially those with fewer resources, including the rural half of the country. There is some evidence from research in other countries that senior volunteering and mutual aid can have even greater impact in rural areas where social welfare systems are quite limited (Skinner 2008; Winterton and Warburton 2014). Success in rural locales would depend on enhancing existing informal arrangements that are already working, and ensuring that resources for volunteer management are made available. Volunteer service can be hard to sustain. Continuing support and professional management by well-resourced well-managed organizations is vital (Cheung and Ma 2010 Henderson 2009; Tang et al. 2009a, b, 2010; Vinton 2012).

In addition, we need more research on how senior volunteer service is seen by elderly recipients of their care and whether and in what ways they feel that they benefit from it (e.g., Wheeler et al. 1998). While the volunteers had a strong sense that their service was beneficial to the seniors they visited, this is just one point of view. We need more studies that ask senior clients themselves whether such service is helpful and in what ways, and how it could be improved. As Chen Hongtu and Sue Levkoff (2016) argue, there is a strong need for mixed methods research to gauge the felt needs and benefits and service preferences of different demographic groups of seniors in China today. In regard to government-funded community services for the elderly, many seniors in the neighborhoods I researched said that they would prefer to receive money directly from the government for their personal discretionary use, rather than have the government pay for services which people may or may not want or need or prioritize. It will remain to be seen whether this frequently-stated preference gets migrated over to NGO and volunteer-related services as more residents become attuned to how government funding is involved in supporting NGOs and volunteers. At the same time, with decline in traditional familial and informal supports and exposure to new organized community-based services, volunteer or otherwise, many Shanghai seniors are coming to appreciate a variety of organized services which they had not previously known to want or need.

Conclusion

There is much potential to be tapped in bringing together agendas for productive aging and support of the elderly in community context. As long as the limitations are

recognized and programs are well-managed, the benefits are likely to outweigh the drawbacks of leveraging the power of older volunteers to help to build and support age-friendly communities for seniors in more parts of both urban and rural China, as well as other parts of the world. Fortunately, China has been blessed in recent years with a large sum of money to put into social experimentation in order to build and pilot-test social service models for the changing needs of the population. With the recent slowdown in the Chinese economy, it will be interesting to see to what degree this investment continues and which programs end up being scaled up beyond large urban areas like Shanghai. As some studies elsewhere are beginning to show, their impact could be even greater in rural and other less privileged areas of the country.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

Ethical Treatment of Experimental Subjects (Animal and Human) All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Vermont.

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