

Reflection on Guigang Working Trip (25th - 26th February, 2017)

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As this was my first time participating in one of the Project Mingde trips, I could not have imagined how rewarding it would be. It is one thing to read about current social issues and room for improvement in China, but it's a whole different thing to personally witness it by going into the field and connect with the people yourself. As a cultural anthropologist I find it typically important to submerge myself in the cultural reality which will help me expand my understanding of the regional identity beyond the surface of the classrooms at home. Therefore I was particularly very excited to use this opportunity to learn more about current challenges in China hands-on.

Even though my Mandarin is poor, the communication with the villagers and the people involved was utterly fruitful. I discovered that offering help often breaks the ice. The first evening a few men from the village, among whom the principal of the school, prepared dinner for us. It was not a usual dinner: they had built a sort of bonfire, covered by a pile of clay rocks, as if constructing a natural version of an oven. As ultimately the pile of rocks would collapse because of the generated heat, they would smash the rocks with a shovel, and burying sweet potatoes, an entire chicken and some corn wrapped in tinfoil, in order for it to be cooked. Offering the guys to help prepare the bonfire proved to be fruitful in establishing a relationship. The next day I helped the women preparing lunch. My lack of Mandarin vocabulary limited me in having deeper conversations with them, however we all seemed to be just content with some small-talk while cooking.

I believe it is important to be with the people you're trying to solve problems for, in this case the construction of an additional school building. To take the students to the actual site, researching the opportunities hands-on and conversing with the locals with whom the project is concerned is of utmost importance. Only in this way helping them can only be actually helpful.