

Globalizing 4-H Youth Development: The Michigan 4-H China Initiative

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Abstract

This article introduces Michigan 4-H Youth Development's efforts with China beginning in 1988 with an agreement to bring the Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe to the state and culminating with the first stages of the 4-H China Initiative. The Initiative promises to expand the Michigan 4-H Global and Cultural Education Program and to introduce and test a Michigan 4-H Youth Development model in China. This work explores the increasing need for and benefits of internationalizing 4-H and introduces the formation of a model for Extension to work with China especially as it pertains to rural youth. It lays out the preliminary steps to engagement including lessons learned and outlines next steps and future opportunities for engagement with China for 4-H Youth Development in the United States.

Key words: international, youth development, China, 4-H Youth Development

Introduction

Michigan 4-H Youth Development has a nineteen-year history of partnering with China to produce educational programs in Michigan. Since 1988, nearly 300,000 Michigan youth have been involved in what is called the “Michigan 4-H China Project.” This is a global education program that works with Michigan kindergartners through sixth graders, but also provides educational opportunities for seventh through twelfth graders. Nine separate programs have come out of the Michigan 4-H China Project including a Wuhan teacher exchange where the emphasis was on integrating the study of China in the existing school curriculum. The Michigan 4-H China Project is unique among 4-H programs in the U.S. It is based on the belief that when a child has a significant and positive global and cultural experience, it can last a lifetime and affect adult decisions and behaviors. Based on these successful partnerships and outcomes the Michigan 4-H China Project will inform and will now be incorporated into the Michigan 4-H China Initiative.

The Michigan 4-H China Initiative is a pilot project composed of three components: the establishment of 4-H Youth Development in China, the expansion of the current Michigan 4-H China Project, and the development and implementation of 4-H International Exchanges between Michigan and China. The Initiative is occurring under the auspices of the Michigan 4-H Youth Development Global and Cultural Education (GCE) program and is a part of and will contribute to Michigan State University’s China Initiative. The overarching goal of this effort is to provide youth in Michigan and China with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills and perspectives necessary to live, work and succeed in a rapidly changing and globalizing world.

This article covers the origins of Michigan 4-H Youth Development’s involvement in China and how relationships were developed and evolved. These efforts form the foundation for the Michigan 4-H China Initiative.

Rationale

The impetus for the Michigan 4-H China Project and the new 4-H China Initiative emerges from increasing global interdependence, the rise of China as an economic and political power, and socio-economic shifts occurring in both Michigan and China. The manifestations of globalization – globalizing economies, the information revolution, cultural transfer and hybridization, technology advances, immigration, declining environments, widening income gaps, and military and political policies – are impacting the daily lives of young people in ways unimaginable even a generation ago. Young people must be prepared to meet these challenges and those yet to come (Asia Society, 2007). The vision of the Michigan 4-H Youth Development international efforts in and with China is to prepare young people in both China and Michigan with the knowledge, skills and perspectives to not only participate in, but to actively thrive in a rapidly changing and globalizing world.

Relationships between Michigan and China are predicated on China’s emergence as a global power and as the world’s fastest growing economy. Yet despite the prosperity and rapid development from opening to the outside world, China is facing massive problems: rural out migration, rising social inequalities, unemployment, increasing crime rates and environmental degradation. In the countryside these problems are especially acute. While eighty percent of China’s population is rural, opportunities in the countryside are limited. Rural unemployment and underemployment, though difficult to measure, may be as much as 35 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of China.) Lack of jobs in rural areas has led to high levels of out migration and increasing inequalities. It’s estimated that between 65 million and 130 million migrant

workers have moved off-farm into China's cities. The United Nations reports that rural migrants face a difficult situation upon moving to urban areas. Good paying and secure jobs are hard to get while access to housing and healthcare is limited (CDRF, 2005). These challenges are compounded by an educational system that does not fully address the needs of the rural youth. The majority of rural children do not go on to high school because they cannot pass the entrance exams or because of high tuition fees. The education they do receive is exam-focused, prepares students for academics, and provides few practical skills necessary for young people to participate effectively in the work force or in civil society.

The Chinese agricultural extension system, with a mandate to provide practical skills to farmers, focuses on increasing agricultural production and transferring associated technical skills. It does not prepare rural people, especially young people, across a broader spectrum of knowledge and skills necessary to function in an increasingly market-oriented production system or to be active participants in civil society. Consequently, rural youth may feel unprepared for either rural life or an urban existence and have limited opportunities to contribute to the development of the country (Chang, 2003).

While the situation in Michigan is qualitatively different from that of China, the state is also experiencing the effects of globalization – the state's manufacturing base is shrinking, unemployment rates are high, and workers are leaving the state in ever increasing numbers. Despite these negative trends a globalizing market offers hope for the state's economy. Michigan is the fourth largest state in the U.S. in exports, with China as Michigan's fastest growing Asian market. However, studies show that young people in the U.S. lack essential cross-cultural skills and are at a competitive disadvantage in the global marketplace – thirty-seven percent of U.S. students can not locate China on a map; only 20,000 to 40,000 students study Mandarin Chinese, a language spoken by 1.3 billion people; and most are "dangerously uninformed about international matters, in particular about Asia" (CED, 2006). A 2002 study found that Michigan students are no better informed than illustrated by these national statistics (Schools, 2002). Indeed, 21st century skills focusing on global competencies have only recently been introduced by the Michigan Department of Education into the state's educational agenda. Yet it is these very skills that businesses look for when seeking new employees and the lack of which they say hampers their ability to expand internationally (CED, 2006).

While economic concerns are at the forefront of Michigan's agenda, the benefits of global competencies extend far beyond employability. Studies show that young people who are exposed to international experiences of various forms have enhanced cultural awareness, improved cross-cultural communication skills, an expanded worldview, increased tolerance towards others, and ability engage in critical thinking (Carey & Brueing, 2002; Tritz & Martin, 1997; Opper et.al. 1990).

4-H Youth Development as Part of the Solution

While the United States and China have very different histories and traditions, 4-H has the potential to play a role in preparing both Michigan and Chinese youth for the 21st century. In China, 4-H can play a role in the country's development similar to the role it played in the development of the United States. 4-H Youth Development originated in the U.S. during the transition from an agricultural to an industrial nation. Rural youth joined 4-H clubs to acquire the knowledge and skills to become active and successful adults. It quickly became apparent that 4-H also served as an effective means to introduce new technologies to rural communities. Through 4-H clubs and projects, children were able to learn about and practice agricultural

innovations, which their parents observed and later adopted. Over the years, 4-H continued to address the agricultural needs and interests of the nation; but as the nation changed so too did 4-H. 4-H expanded its programming to include areas such as arts, cultural and global awareness, workforce preparation, entrepreneurialship, youth health and wellness, natural resources and environmental education, violence, and other risk prevention for youth. Today 4-H Youth Development delivers what are now called life and content skills through a dedicated volunteer staff using an experiential-based learning approach to young people across the country. Drawing upon its rich experience, 4-H has the potential to provide a broad array of content and life skills responsive to the needs and interests of young people in China as the nation transitions from a traditional to modern agriculture and from a state to a market-oriented economy (Radhakrishna, 2005).

In Michigan, the 4-H China Initiative will contribute to the further evolution of 4-H by explicitly introducing and operationalizing the concept of global competencies (Merryfield, 1993). Young people will be introduced to new life and content skills in a broader international context and existing life and content areas will be globalized. International and virtual exchanges will provide a space for cultural learning, critical reflection, and cross-cultural dialogue. The knowledge, skills, perspectives from these endeavors will enable youth to function more effectively in a globalizing economy and to become responsible global citizens. Additionally, the Initiative will contribute to a movement to redefine education for the 21st Century not only in Michigan, but across the United States. The resulting model for youth programming and adult training will incorporate the concept of global competencies from both a theoretical and applied perspective and will be informed by transformational and experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1997; Itin, 1999).

Methods

This work uses critical reflection to understand and analyze the experience of Michigan 4-H Youth Development's engagement in China as a form of case study. It draws on the participatory action research as a means to integrate theory and practice designed to bring about social change (Lather, 1986). In this work, the authors are engaged in the process of developing and implementing the 4-H China Initiative while at the same time documenting and critically reflecting upon that experience to improve it. The primary methods used include: participant observation, critical self-awareness, engagement with experts, and critical dialogue with key participants in Michigan and China. Presenting this case study highlights key aspects of globalizing 4-H Youth Development in both a domestic and international setting.

The Beginning of Michigan 4-H's Engagement with China: The Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe

Michigan 4-H Youth Development began programming with China in the fall of 1988 in a rather serendipitous fashion. Dr. Norman Brown, President of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Dr. Gordon Guyer, Vice President for Governmental Affairs at Michigan State University, suggested that Michigan 4-H bring the Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe from Sichuan, China, to perform for Michigan children. Earlier, a Michigan governmental delegation had seen the group perform in China. A comment was made to the dance troupe that it would be nice if the troupe could perform in Michigan. This was interpreted by the dance troupe as an invitation. It was suggested that Michigan 4-H, with its statewide network and youth education expertise, had the capacity to organize and be responsible for bringing the troupe to Michigan. Betsy Knox, as

the Michigan 4-H Arts Program Leader, was given the responsibility of implementing this effort. Less than one year later, the Chengdu troupe came to Michigan and performed in thirty-four locations attended by more than 23,000 children and 4,000 adults. These successful activities launched what came to be called the Michigan 4-H China Project.

Implementing the Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe activity began with and depended on establishing relationships of trust in China. This entailed a visit to China to meet the Chinese partners and to lay the foundations for cultural understanding. Negotiations with the Sichuan Foreign Affairs Office and dance troupe representatives immediately ensued. Negotiations included: finding a common goal, clarifying the age and number of troupe membership (youth versus adult troupe members and the number of troupe members the project could financially manage), travel roster (including governmental officials, dancers and troupe technicians), agreeing on dances that would appeal to Michigan youth, number of days and performances, and the possibility of staying with host families. The Michigan team got to know and observe the dance troupe and the Chinese group learned about 4-H as a youth development organization. At the end of one week an agreement was formalized and signed.

Upon arriving back in the U.S., a broad team of experts was formed with representation from 4-H Youth Development, public schools, universities, state government and non-governmental organizations¹. As the dance troupe project unfolded many other experts were consulted to facilitate travel of the dance troupe to the U.S.². As the dance activity was introduced to Michigan counties, dozens of MSU Extension county partners emerged, including Calhoun County International Relations Committee, several Intermediate School Districts and the Midland County Chinese Association.

A work team of eight people was assembled to provide leadership and support. Due to the short timeline, planning and fundraising needed to occur simultaneously. Ultimately \$106,000 was raised from 57 donors across the state including significant donations from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs. The remaining 55 donors were identified through the Michigan 4-H Foundation and 4-H counties interested in hosting a performance. This interest was motivated by a commitment to Michigan youth, a recognition and curiosity about the changes occurring in China, and the growing sense of the importance of China in the world.

The most complicated aspect of the China dance troupe visit was setting the stage for the performance in a way that maximized its experiential learning potential. This required researching the dances; producing and scripting the show; and staging, props, lighting and sound production. Two educational exhibits were developed to accompany the performances: *The Children of Chengdu* and *The People's Republic of China, Sichuan Province*. An accompanying curriculum was also developed called *Discover China*. This pre-performance teaching packet was developed to reinforce and expand on cultural learning for children who would be attending the dance performance. These learning materials were interdisciplinary and included language, history, the arts, geography, social studies and the environment. To complement the youth

¹ This groups included 4-H Youth Development county and state staff, Michigan State University's Asian Studies Center, the Theatre Department, Wharton Center for the Performing Arts, and the College of Education; University of Michigan's Chinese American Cultural & Education Center of Michigan and the Michigan Institute for Teachers of Asian Studies; Michigan government representatives from the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Natural Resources and Education; and the Michigan Alliance for Arts Education, a statewide K-12 arts organization.

² This included the Chinese Consulate in Chicago; the American Consulate in Chengdu; the America Embassy in Beijing; the U.S. State Department; the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization in Detroit; MSU Office for International Students and Scholars; MSU offices for Risk Management & Insurance and Contracts & Grants

learning, a home-stay packet (consisting of the “Michigan Host Family Packet” and an “Orientation to the United States”) was developed to ensure that family stays were a positive learning experience. While the dance performance by itself would have been a valuable cultural experience, the educational materials that accompanied the performance were necessary to create an internationalized learning opportunity.

The resulting publicity along the dance troupe’s performance route was significant with feature articles in every major and many small newspapers along the way with front page stories such as “Chinese Charm” (Nichollette, 1989) and “Welcome China” (Midland Center for the Arts, 1989). *The Arts in Education Primer*, a publication from the National Endowment for the Arts (Summer 1991), featured the 4-H dance troupe story as their lead article. The story was aptly titled “Model of a Successful Collaboration.” In 1990, the Michigan 4-H China Project: Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe activity was awarded the John A. Hannah Award for Program Excellence. This award annually recognizes one Extension program and is considered the most prestigious of Extension awards in the state. The response by local communities and the University indicated an openness to learn about China.

Michigan 4-H China Project Activities Expands

With the success of the dance troupe performance and accompanying activities, additional opportunities to educate and enrich the lives of Michigan children through globalized programming and curricula were in demand. Accordingly, six additional activities were developed, the first being an audiovisual program called *Discover the Children of China* – a teaching guide based on photos taken in China in 1988. The objective of this activity was to encourage Michigan children to think about the daily lives of Chinese children who were their own age. A second activity, *Discover Chinese Dance*, resulted from the dance troupe’s parting gift to Michigan 4-H – a trunk full of ethnic dance costumes, masks and props used as part of their Michigan dance tour. Michigan 4-H clubs, schools and after-school programs continue to use these materials to learn Chinese dance and culture and to put on their own versions of the Chinese dance performance. The *4-H Children’s Art Exchange* uses “visual letters,” to allow Michigan and Chinese youth to “talk” to each other using pens, pencils, crayons and brushes to express something important in their lives. Pets, friends, family, school, sports and holidays are favorite topics. Complex ideas also emerge such as peace, diversity and protecting the environment. Often, children express interest in bringing the two countries together as in the painting, “Chinese Panda Hoeing in a Michigan Corn Field.” Over 100,000 Michigan children have created “visual letters” for Chinese children since the art exchange’s inception in 1991. Lacking a common language, children are still able to learn about each other and transcend cultural differences.

The focus on art continued with the *Chinese Brush Painting Project*. Yu-Ping Yung, a Chinese American born in the People’s Republic of China and raised in Taiwan, taught nearly 5000 Michigan children in sixteen Michigan counties the basics of traditional fine art brush painting. These children, using bamboo brushes and rice paper, learned about the “Four Treasures” (paper, inkstone, inkstick and brush) and the “Four Gentlemen” (a traditional method of teaching the four basic brush strokes). Most importantly, they experienced how children in China learn to paint. Mrs. Yung taught 105 workshops to children, and she traveled more than 4000 miles to complete her responsibilities. Along the way she stayed with more than 20 host families, who like the children she taught, were enriched by her presence.

For seven years, Zhou Hualiang, a 4-H graduate assistant, worked with 5- to 14-year-old youth across Michigan in classrooms, assemblies and other community and school settings. Zhou presented *A Child's Life in China*, an informal curriculum on a Chinese child's life at schools, at home, what they ate, what games they played, celebrations, language, geography and much more. Zhou presented more than 700 sessions and reached more than 35,000 youth. Following Zhou, Juxia Su, an MSU visiting scholar assumed the role from 1997 to 1998; she reached nearly 4100 youth in 61 presentations.

As a result of the Michigan 4-H focus on China, Michigan was chosen as one of five U.S. sites for a pilot "teacher in residence" program for the 1993-94 school year by the Master's Foundation in Florida. The emphasis was on integrating the study of China into the existing public school curriculum. This activity became known as the *Wuhan Teacher Exchange*. One Michigan 4-H county staff member traveled to China as part of the exchange.

Piloting 4-H Youth Development in China: The Michigan 4-H China Initiative

In 2004, Dr. Weijun Zhao, then with MSU's Institute of International Agriculture and currently Director of the Office of China Programs, recognized the potential to expand relationships with China through the Michigan 4-H China Project. Preliminary talks began in Michigan to assess the feasibility and desirability of moving in this direction. Based on a positive response, Dr. Zhao met with Dr. Jingyuan Xia, Director General, National Agro-Technical Extension and Service Center (NATESC), Chinese Ministry of Agriculture to discuss the possibilities of piloting Michigan 4-H Youth Development. Dr. Xia saw the potential for 4-H to contribute to NATESC's nascent work with rural youth and more generally to rural development in China (Knox, 2004).

In May 2005, a Michigan 4-H delegation consisting of 4-H state and county staff, a 4-H volunteer and Dr. Zhao traveled to Beijing to meet with potential partnering agencies to discuss a national partnership between China and Michigan 4-H. The delegation shared with their Chinese hosts and potential partners, the basic structure and essential components of Michigan 4-H Youth Development and its potential application to youth development in China. The key element of 4-H Youth Development that resonated with the Chinese representatives was the ability to develop practical content and life skills as represented in the life skills wheel, part of *Targeting Life Skills Model* (Hendricks, 1998). Chinese saw these skills, especially those related to "Heart" and "Hands," as making a positive contribution to the development of their children. Late in 2006, Michigan 4-H hosted two delegations including our national partners from Beijing and members of the potential pilot site from Binzhou City. Both groups interacted with 4-H youth, volunteers, families and staff. They were able to observe firsthand the impact 4-H has on the lives of youth. This visit reinforced the Chinese interest in 4-H and furthered an understanding of the "hands-on" learning that occurs in 4-H projects and activities.

NATESC has since created a 4-H China Initiative working group composed of four members –three of whom have attended MSU short-term training courses and the fourth member is now working with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The group as a whole has a deep understanding of international development, a strong commitment to systemic approaches to development and good facility with English. The NATESC Working Group and MSU representatives discussed items relating to implementation of the 4-H China Initiative in China and budget commitments. Responding to the needs of rural youth in China, an adjustment was made to work with 12- to 23-year-olds rather than 5- to 19-year-olds as is the case in the United States. Older youth who no longer attend school could benefit from skills to prepare them

to be successful and contributing adults. This adjustment in age range is similar to that made when 4-H Youth Development was introduced and adapted in other countries.

In Michigan, the 4-H China Initiative received positive reviews from the MSU Extension Regional Directors and 4-H county staff working with the 4-H Global and Cultural Education priority area. The Regional Directors recognize that the 4-H China Initiative is consistent with a core priority identified during the MSUE issue identification process: “providing young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in today’s economy.” Global competencies in general and familiarity with China in particular are seen as key elements to prepare Michigan youth to work and succeed in a global economy and a society that is increasingly interdependent.

Lessons Learned

During the process of engagement between Michigan 4-H and China, several lessons were learned that can be applied to other efforts to globalize 4-H Youth Development. When internationalizing any Extension program, dream big and believe in the organization’s ability to plan and implement these dreams. Substantial support in time and resources are required by the people responsible for carrying out this vision. Be open to opportunities that are presented directly via an invitation from a university vice president or the president of a major foundation; take big risks in part because others believe in you. Find less obvious opportunities that are incubating in an existing program, such as the eight separate activities that came about because of the initial Chengdu Music and Dance Troupe activity.

Find a vision that resonates with staff, volunteers, partners and donors, such as the Michigan 4-H China Project vision – “If experiences of awareness, understanding and appreciation of other cultures and people are vivid enough and meaningfully tied to a youth’s daily life, they will last a lifetime and affect adult decisions and behaviors.”

Meet challenges with persistence and commitment. Implementing the dance troupe activity is a case study in these needed qualities. Be aware that political situations are fluid and can prove to be significant barriers to internationalizing activities. Given that the dance troupe visit was shortly after Tiananmen Square both the Chinese and U.S. government were concerned about international travel to and from China. However, these challenges can be overcome by finding sympathetic individuals in key positions who are willing to champion your cause. The well-being of children is a shared concern that may transcend political differences. This was certainly the case when the Chinese and U.S. government were hesitant to grant travel documents to the Chengdu dance troupe.

International partnerships must be based on mutual interests. However, understanding what these mutual interests are is a negotiated dialogue working across differences. The ability to appreciate socio-cultural differences and to come to agreement takes patience, time, trust and respect.

Internationalizing 4-H activities and programs has served to complement Michigan teachers’ educational efforts. The following statements illustrate teachers’ responses: “Our students heard and saw things they will remember for the rest of their lives,” “We could actually have been in China given the performers and their origins. This was a very direct experience,” “The kids continue to bring in news from China,” and “We especially appreciated the new view into China rather than war and unrest. Our awareness of China and the world has increased tremendously.”

Funding such an ambitious endeavor such as the Michigan 4-H effort with and in China is challenging. Activities that have direct local impact on youth will find funding readily

available from community partners and local people. However, given challenging political and economic conditions, funding a program that affects children outside the U.S. especially in China has proven to be difficult. This is complicated by increasing competition for funding from foundations and corporations interested in supporting efforts of this type.

Some people currently see China as a threat to the United States and are not supportive of 4-H sharing a youth development model that will increase their competitive edge. We have argued that while there is the potential for this to occur, we intend to build positive relationships which may lead to long-term partnerships which are of mutual benefit.

Conclusions

From its inception, the goal of the Michigan 4-H China Project was to help young people acquire an awareness, understanding and appreciation for other cultures through experiential learning. A key focus was drawing attention to the many similarities between the lives of Michigan children and their counterparts in China. The 4-H China Initiative promises to continue this work. Young people will be introduced to new life and content skills in a broader international context and existing life and content areas will be globalized. Internationalizing activities will provide a space for cultural learning and cross-cultural dialogue. The knowledge, skills, and perspectives from these endeavors will enable youth to function more effectively in a globalizing economy and to become more responsible global citizens.

Additionally, the 4-H China Initiative hopes to contribute to the further evolution of 4-H Youth Development by explicitly introducing and operationalizing the concept of global competencies and establishing relationships between young people in Michigan and China. Given that today's young people will be working in a global market place and living in a global society, they must acquire a different set of knowledge, skills and perspectives than previous generations. On a more global level, young people in Michigan and China who participate in the Initiative will have the potential to develop long-lasting relationships. From these relationships our nations will have a potential foundation from which to build long-term peace and prosperity (Ingram & Radhakrishna (Ingram & Radhakrishna, 2004).

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