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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)



Volunteers For Peace - Vermont non-profit serving the world

by: Mimi Cheng and Gabriel Rincón-Mora

(edited and co-authored by Wishtank Founding Editor Garrett Heaney)

Volunteers For Peace is a Vermont non-profit organization headquartered in Belmont Village. Founded in 1982 with the purpose of “promoting peaceful relations among nations,” VFP was accepted as a member of the Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (CCIVS) at UNESCO — The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. VFP President Peter Coldwell got involved in international voluntary service in the late sixties when he went to Hungary and Czechoslovakia through a program sponsored by the Boston-based Unitarian-Universalist Service Committee. Working with men and women from diverse cultures taught Peter a deep appreciation for community building, and the sense of accomplishment gained from serving humanity made a lifelong impact that would eventually manifest in the foundation of Volunteers For Peace. Currently, VFP sends over 3,000 volunteers a year to over 100 countries to learn culturally while working for peace,

education, the environment and a wider range of causes.

Two VFP volunteers, Gabriel Rincón-Mora and Mimi Cheng, offer us accounts of their work in China and Tanzania respectively.

Tanzania

Tanzania is located in southeastern Africa, just to the south of Kenya on the coast of the Indian Ocean. The Republic of Tanzania was born in 1964 with the unification of the landmass once known as Tanganyika and the island of Zanzibar.

With a population approaching 37 million, the peoples of Tanzania amount to over 100 different tribes and ethnic groups. The majority of men and women speak any number of Bantu dialects, although Swahili and English are the official languages of the country. Some of the larger groups are the Sukuma, the Nyamwezi, the Ngonde and the Masai (whom you will read about in the following volunteer's account). The religious beliefs among these peoples are also diverse, with a large showing of both Christianity and Islam. While Africans are the vast majority, Arab, Indian and European peoples and influence have been widely integrated into certain aspects of Tanzania's culture. While education is free, there simply are not enough schools or educators to accommodate all of the children of Tanzania. About three out of 10 children are not able to attend school or receive formal education.

To help the people of Kigonigoni, Tanzania with both the education and irrigation problems, VFP volunteer Gabriel Rincón-Mora undertook a water conservation project of building a levy and made bricks for the construction of a new school. His story follows.



Page 1 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

Gabriel Rincón-Mora reporting

We arrived at the Mwanga bus station a little past one in the afternoon. I stepped off the rattly taxi cab and paid my white bearded driver 20,000 shillings. We agreed on 18,000 but I gladly gave him the extra two dollars. A mini bus pulled over and parked just in front of us. Men, women, and children stood all around the clay-dirt station, leaning against whatever they could find, smoking, talking and spitting. I burned under the sun only for a moment, before walking off to a shack hoping that it'd be a bar. I was relieved to pay for a Sprite, place my backpack on the ground and sit next to a woman gossiping with others on the veranda. I was no longer a stranger, although my white, non-Swahili speaking face would've proven otherwise.



The visit to Masai Boma was educational for both the volunteers and the villagers. Gabriel was able to share his knowledge on global economics with the officials of Masai.

This is how my volunteer journey into Tanzania began. A couple of paled-faced strangers walked off a bus, saw me and walked straight over. They were a bit nervous and felt visibly relieved when they saw me, especially when they found out I too spoke Spanish. Soon after, our contact arrived — Mr. Dustan Shimbo, a lawyer assigned to the volunteer organization.

In all, about sixty volunteers joined us from various parts of the world: Spain, Korea, Japan, Switzerland, Belgium, England, Kenya and Italy, to name a few. I was one of two Americans in the whole group. Half of us were assigned to the city of Mwanga and the rest, including myself, were hauled over open country to a remote farming village called Kigonigoni.

Our first project was to make bricks for the construction of primary and secondary schools. We first dug the ground to turn and gather enough dirt for the mud. Then we mixed the dirt with water, stepping on the mud with our bare feet, before transporting it in buckets to the place where we made the bricks. The process was simple but the work under the heat of the bare sun was arduous. We were supposed to work with the villagers, shoulder-to-shoulder, but we ended up doing it on our own. The villagers' needs were more pressing than their desire to erect schools. The importance of education, as is in many other parts of the world, is not uniformly self-evident.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 2 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

During the second portion of our stay, we worked on a water conservation project. The farming village of Kigonigoni lies on dry land and the lack of water is very much a life-threatening issue. The local farmers and the government of Tanzania have teamed up to build levees and channels to steer water to the various parts of the farming community. This project, however, is expensive and time-consuming. The farmers therefore agreed to build the structures and pay for half of the material themselves. The government would pay for the other half and offer some guidance in the construction process. Our volunteer group was assigned to help build such a levee.



A typical adobe hut constructed of mud, wood and hay in the village of Caramba, Masai Boma.

Unlike the brick-making project, we worked with the farmers, shoveling, hauling, digging, breaking stones and mixing cement. In many ways, the job was more demanding than making bricks but it was much more rewarding. We'd take turns at digging and shoveling, sharing the load with the farmers and helping each other when we were noticeably tired and dragging from exhaustion, although they were more efficient and better at it than we were. We couldn't really communicate but our work and sweat bound us. We laughed at each other, at my clumsy attempts to peel a sugar cane for a snack, at their curiosity of our Western ways, at how white we were, at everything. It was obvious that this project was indeed important to the community and we were not only making a positive impact but also forging cultural ties of friendship.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 3 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

For the last day of our stay, out of appreciation, the villagers killed and cooked a goat for us. I was on kitchen duty that day and assigned to help them cook. By the time I joined in, they had already killed and skinned the goat. The women were very friendly and quickly put me to work, though. The skin was on one side and a bucket filled with the insides of the animal on the other. I cut all the insides into little chunks, as instructed, and placed them in another big bucket, which was later dumped in two-foot wide pots of cooking rice. The testicles of the goat were roasted in open fire separately (only men normally eat this delicatessen and I, of course, partook in this tradition, which is not unlike the Spanish tradition of eating bull's testicles otherwise known as *criadillas* during bull fights).



To show their appreciation for the volunteers' help, the villagers sacrificed and cooked a goat. The insides of the goat are considered a delicacy in Tanzanian culture.

The rice and meat, I must say, were delicious, although the soft, liver-like texture of certain pieces was a bit less inviting than the rest. At the end of the feast, the women danced and sang traditional songs and men responded with hurrahs and such, invoking the women to continue. Some of us joined in the dancing and singing, and the villagers ignored our obvious singing and dancing inadequacies.

On our day off, out of courtesy to us, the government officials at Kigonigoni took us to a Masai Boma, an indigenous tribal village. They used their government influence to take us as *visitors* (not tourists), which is not an easy feat, given the Masai's independent and highly protective nature. We drove through open country to the even more remote Masai village of Caramba. Red adobe and uneven pine shacks populated the community. The men wore red and blue drapes around their bodies with wide-looped earrings encrusted in their ears. Married men had short black hair and unmarried men wore long, beaded, red hair. Women were bald and wore brass and white loops around their necks, wrists and

ankles. They were as awed by our presence as we were by theirs.

A group of men led us to a meeting hall and waited for the elder of the village to sit, at which point the second in command spoke in their native language, then in Swahili for the sake of the officials, and finally — to my surprise — in English to welcome us. We and the villagers were invited to ask questions of each other through our interpreter. I spoke up and ended up acting as the spokesperson for our group. I was interested in learning about their way of life and others were reluctant to start a dialogue, including the Masai.

I asked them what their pressing needs were and not surprisingly they said water. As we kept talking, the challenges of communication became evident. We hadn't a solution to their problem, just curiosity and a willingness to share and lend a helping hand. We felt, through no fault of our own, we had somehow let them down, as if they might have expected an answer or solution from us.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 4 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

The discussion, now monopolized by the second in command and myself, started to strain under the weight of the misunderstanding. The village elder, unfortunately, was inebriated and continued to blurt out incongruous comments, which the translator reluctantly interpreted for me. The government officials and some of the Swahili speakers in our group finally stepped in. We, the volunteers, apologized for the misunderstanding and the situation cooled down. It was then that we were invited to see them dance.

Unmarried men jumped and shouted two or three at a time, taking turns. Their long skinny legs launched from the ground and wiggled in the air as they hopped up and down. The women encouraged them by clapping and also shouting. We were invited to participate in the dancing as well. The second in command and true leader pulled me aside to thank me for the comments and suggestions I gave during the meeting. He asked me what I did for a living and, upon learning I was a university professor, invited me to come back to the village and lecture on Western ways.



Two Masai children observe while the volunteers and officials from the village communicate.

I returned a few days later, alone with a driver on a motorcycle through open country. Unfortunately, we had a blow out near an abandoned school building that was being used for a parliamentary campaign meeting. My driver introduced me as a professor and the candidate for a seat in parliament kindly asked his driver to give me a ride to the Masai Boma. The driver drove me to the village and offered me a Sprite on the way (I do not normally drink Sprite this much). He then left me alone with the Masai. A group of Masai men, including the second in command, were waiting under a tree and warmly greeted me.

This time, expectations were clear: I was to lecture and nothing else. I prepared to talk about American geography, history, culture, globalization and micro and macro-economics. I didn't really know what they wanted to learn, so I simply started on geography and improvised my way through the rest, based on their response and interest levels.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 5 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

They were intrigued and puzzled by world history and culture, and honed their interest to globalization and economy. I told them economy, like in nature, is based on a circle of life, circle of interdependent economies exchanging goods and services through the medium of currency. To join such a global economy, each member must contribute to reap the benefits of working together. Member countries are generally interested in engaging and encouraging new economies to join and therefore enhance the benefits of all by increasing the size of the market and number of possible goods manufactured and sold. To join, however, like an athlete training for the Olympics, a nation must be prepared and qualified, knowing what it is willing to *give* in return for what they are entitled to *get*. Not understanding this tradeoff is what I thought placed unnecessary burdens on developing countries like those in South America and Africa.



To engage these growing economies, organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) offer loans to third-world countries. Ideally, the third-world countries would be able to develop their economies to such an extent that they become self-sustaining and capable of re-paying their debts, all the while joining the global market. Unfortunately, many African and South American counterparts are not often ready for this engagement and are unable to repay the loans according to the contract. At this point, the IMF exercises policies that are repressive in order to recover its money. These policies are implemented when a default occurs during or after the contract period of the loan. The problem with this, of course, is social unrest and questionable overall gains.

I think the root cause of the resulting predicament is that these struggling economies are not ready to join globalization and should probably not be seeking any international loans, as of yet. Local economic circles must first be developed and debugged to understand the requirements and social tradeoffs of a

market, without the strains, responsibilities and penalties of the larger world market on them. To this end, the Masai Village could viably develop their own micro-economic circle, which is just an analogy for what many third-world communities can do. They could specialize in various fields, like collecting water and herding animals, and barter their goods and services among themselves before attempting to engage foreign markets. They could study each of these fields and increase their productivity and effectiveness, slowly increasing the standard of living of the community.

I cannot imagine how much more help I could've provided as a volunteer than by the discussion we were having. I wanted to share two things from the bottom of my heart, the value of education and the dangers of globalization. I don't think my messages were the most popular but I believe they knew I had no other agenda than to help and share knowledge, because they treated me like an equal and our discussion was a healthy exchange of ideas. And just as the visit started, it ended. They warmly took me by the hand and bid me farewell as a pick-up truck arrived to take me back to Kigonioni.

We finished our water preservation project and rode back through open country to Mwanga to join the rest of the group. Our hosts arranged for an official celebration with government officials and a party, after which I started my journey back home, which took me through Moshi, Dar es Salaam, Johannesburg, London and Chicago before finally arriving back in Atlanta.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 6 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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Wishtank

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

China

Dating back 3,500 years, China is one of the world's oldest civilizations and records one of the earliest written languages. The natives of the country refer to the land as "Zhongguo," which translates to "middle kingdom." This landmass stretches across more than 3.5 million square miles (~ 9,500,000 sq. km), comparable in area to the United States of America.



With the world's largest population of over 1.3 billion, more than 20 percent of Earth's people live within China's borders. The rising number of people in China has posed a serious problem over the past 50 years as the Han (i.e. the ethnic Chinese natives who make up largely 90 percent of the population) face employment dilemmas and poverty.

The enormous growth in industry within China's cities has taken a serious toll on the environment. Air pollution is the leading cause of death in China, and manifests itself in extremely high rates of heart and respiratory disease. Water pollution too is severe and nearly every river in China is considered polluted. Less than 50% of the country's vast population has access to clean water. In urban China, more than 90% of natural water sources are considered severely polluted.

VFP in China

Volunteers for Peace first extended its reach to China in 2001 and has sent over 30 volunteers to the area. In the early years of VFP's work in China, the organization placed 15 teachers of English with various organizations throughout the country. Currently, VFP works closely with just one organization,

namely Greenway Thailand. The work is classified as “social” and includes teaching and lending support to various projects to better the living environment of the small farming village of Xinjing.



Xinjing Village is located about 90 km from Hainan Island’s main city of Haikou and consists of just 90 households. Typically, each volunteer lives in the 90-family village for about two weeks, along with a group of other volunteers who reside, cook, work and teach together.

In the official camp description, Greenway states “The work will consist of developping friendships between the participants and the local students, teachers and villagers, to teach some local students English, and more importantly, let them meet friends from other parts of the world so that their mental horizon expands.”

On the fourth of July, 2005, Mimi Cheng left her home in Clarkesville, Maryland and departed for Wengcheng to participate in this two week program. In conversation with Mimi, she tells us that the experience was rewarding and she benefitted from it personally as much as she was able to help the people of the village. Her story follows.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 7 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

Xinjing Village • Wencheng, China by Xue-Wei (Mimi) Cheng

Participating in the workcamp in China last summer was one of the most incredible things that I have ever done. I volunteered for two weeks in Xinjing, a farming village in the Wencheng countryside of Hainan Island. Our village was on the northern end of the island, about an hour away from the tourist city of Haikou. The weather was hot and extremely humid, as one would expect of any tropical island. The scenery was lush and green. Palm trees, banana trees and rice paddies filled the landscape. Geckos scaled the walls of our house, beetles crawled on our floors and butterflies flew all around (in company of the mosquitos). We'd be waken by the sound of crowing roosters early each morning.



Mimi and the volunteers started each day installing a drainage system on a main road of the village. The children would help and pick wild berries for the workers.

The village consisted of about 90 families, or about four hundred people. It had two small convenience stores for soda, ice cream, Ramen noodles, cigarettes and beer. The farmers grew rice for their families to eat and watermelon, squash, winter melon, bitter melon and green beans to sell at the markets in the city. Some also raised chickens, pigeons and frogs to be sold and eaten. The villagers would go to a larger neighboring village, Guan'an, (usually on motorcycle — all of the farmers had motorcycles) for the farmers' market, restaurants, Internet café and pool hall. A wide dirt road, bordered by tall grasses and weeds, connected Xinjing and Guan'an.

There were six volunteers in all, three guys, three girls — three from South Korea, one from France, one from Belgium and one (me!) from the United States. We were all college students, ranging in age from

18 to 24, and we got along wonderfully. We lived in a one-story, traditional Chinese house that had been set aside especially for volunteers.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 8 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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Wishtank

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

Our camp leader was a woman by the name of Shao Li. She lived in the village and had grown up in the area. She spoke Hainan, Mandarin and a little English. Mr. Gin, a village man in his late 50s, lived in a room connected to our house and cooked for us everyday. Communicating amongst ourselves was indeed an interesting task. Conversations often had to go through multiple translations in different languages with messages bouncing back and forth until the meaning was correct. I spoke English, Mandarin and a bit of French, so I became the translator of the group, translating Chinese to English and vice versa between Shao Li, Mr. Gin and the volunteers.



Every morning, we'd wake up around 6:30 or 7:00. After the traditional local breakfast of sweetened black coffee and greasy buns, we'd set off to work with a few of the village men on the dirt road connecting the village to Guan'an. Our job was to clear the sides of the road of the tall weeds and shrubs using hoes. This way, the sides of the road would be clear and slightly downward sloping so that when it rained, water would slide off of the road, preventing the road from flooding. We worked in a long row along each side of the road, section by section. Once someone was done clearing one section, he or she would go to the head of the row and start on a new section. Because of the sweltering heat and humidity, we took frequent water breaks. The children would often accompany us, playing in the fields that lined the road and come out to distract us during our breaks. They were generous and would pick wild berries for us from the nearby bushes — huge handfuls that we could barely finish!

We'd return home around 11:00 a.m. and Mr. Gin would have lunch prepared for us. After a siesta, we'd teach English to village children. We transformed our sitting room into a classroom. The room was divided in two spaces for two classes, one for the younger children and the other for the older children. We taped large pieces of construction paper on the walls for our blackboards. We taught them the

alphabet, numbers, colors, animals, the days of the week, body parts and other commonly used words of the language. We also created games for them to make the lessons more interesting. The volunteer from France taught the children a song and dance in English that helped them learn the directions — up and down, right and left — and I led them in a game of Simon Says to help them learn the parts of the body.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 9 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

The children in the village were quite something! So spirited and lively, with an endless supply of energy! They were always smiling, laughing, giggling. Day and night, they ran all through the house. They wrestled on the floor, climbed all over us and chased one another in circles. Our house was constantly filled with the sound of the children's laughter, their yelling and their playing.

At night, after dinner and after the kids had finally returned home for the day, the six of us would lounge in the sitting room. We'd be exhausted, not so much from the physical labor in the morning as from keeping up with the children the rest of the day. Sometimes we'd bring out snacks that we'd brought from our home countries. There was Belgian chocolate, Korean ginseng chewing gum and Chinese millet chips. Occasionally the others would buy cheap beer from the little convenience store. We welcomed a man who lived next door who would sometimes wander in. He wouldn't talk much — it was hard for us to understand his Chinese because of his thick local accent. He'd just sit with us, have a cup of beer and maybe taste some of the foods that we shared.



In the afternoons, Mimi and the other volunteers would work with the children, helping them develop English. The students enjoyed the lessons, which often involved games to engage their interest.

As much as we loved the children, it was nice to have quiet when everyone went home for the day! We would sit and have long interesting conversations about everything and anything. We talked about our experiences, our homes, our cultures and our beliefs. We talked about everything from politics to cuisine, to entertainment, to social customs, to travel, to college and so much more.





[Previous Page](#)

Page 10 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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Wishtank

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

We learned a great deal about one another's culture. I was surprised to learn from one of the South Korean volunteers that all Koreans, whether from North or South, regard Korea as one. He said that the wealthiest in South Korea oppose reunification because of the redistribution of wealth that would necessarily occur. He also spoke of an opposition to the potential political system that would have to be implemented to govern a new Korea. Despite this, he taught us, Koreans in general are still unified by a common identity.

Other volunteers also questioned me about the United States. They found it ironic that the U.S. espoused ideas of freedom and democracy when our liberties seem to be increasingly limited because of the War on Terrorism. The French volunteer challenged that Americans were becoming too apathetic and inactive in politics. It was his observation that Americans were losing their revolutionary spirit. He prided France for its revolutionary mindset. I learned so much from these conversations. The other volunteers were some of the most fascinating people I had ever met and I enjoyed these late-night conversations immensely.



Volunteers build a kite for a farewell party.

On the weekends, we had a break from work and teaching. We went to the beach, about half an hour from the village, and toured the city of Wenchang. Two of the farmers in the village taught us how to make kites and lanterns using just tissue paper, bamboo sticks, glue, plastic string and a little wire. A

day or two before the camp ended, the village held a farewell celebration for us. It was outside, in the dark of night. Light bulbs hanging on extension cords illuminated a small dirt clearing outside our house. They had a television and karaoke machine set up. The children sang for us and we sang a few American songs for them. We thanked the village for welcoming us and the village leader thanked us in turn.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 11 of 12 Pages

[Next Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

To conclude the evening, the villagers lit the paper lantern we had made. It was large, five or six feet tall, and it worked like a hot air balloon. They lit the lantern, released it and it flew so high into the sky. It flew until it was so small that it looked just like another star, glowing orange in the night sky, so small, until eventually we couldn't even see it anymore. It was stunning, beautiful and breathtaking! I was in awe.



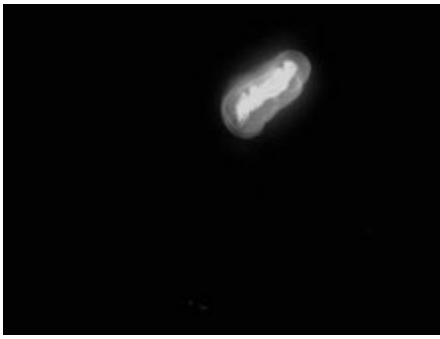
Lighting the kite



Getting warmer



Ready for release



Just another star

This experience was absolutely amazing. I cannot express to you the level of satisfaction and happiness that I received from volunteering at the workcamp. It was more spectacular than anything I could have ever imagined or hoped for. Our group of volunteers had bonded immediately. I miss them dearly, especially for those precious late-night conversations that we had. I miss the village as well. They welcomed us so warmly and I became accustomed to the lifestyle and the daily routine. It became my whole world for those two weeks. I hope very much that someday, I will go back to visit Xinjing Village, and that someday, we volunteers will meet again. •

For more information on Volunteers for Peace, visit the organization online at www.vfp.org.



[Previous Page](#)

Page 12 of 12 Pages

[Home Page](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Contribute](#)
- [Subscribe](#)

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