



A 2005-2007 Peace Corps Volunteer in China walks with her students. Photo by U.S. Peace Corps.

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## OP-ED

# WHY PEACE CORPS SHOULD STAY IN CHINA

By Krista Mangiardi

Given the Peace Corps's crucial importance to international cultural exchange, it is a mistake to close the program in China. On January 16, 2020, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) released a statement, before any press release from the Peace Corps, praising the closure because "China is no longer a developing country."<sup>1</sup> Volunteers on the ground were shocked by the Senator's statement. Later that day, the 130 Peace Corps volunteers in China, all of whom are English teachers, learned that the program would

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close sometime in 2021. Two weeks later, they evacuated due to the spread of COVID-19 and the program closed immediately.<sup>2</sup>

Sen. Rubio's statement suggests that the Peace Corps made an internal decision to close the program. Eventually, the Peace Corps released a statement stating they would phase out the program given "many significant changes in China."<sup>3</sup> Over time, however, a much more complicated truth has emerged, involving a National Security Council meeting chaired by Deputy National Security Advisor Matthew Pottinger.<sup>4</sup> It appears that mounting political pressure and U.S.-China tensions contributed to the decision to close the program.<sup>5</sup>

From 2017-2019, I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Gansu, China. Having been on the ground, I believe that whether the closure is due to China's development or to escalating U.S.-China tensions, the program should continue.

Slashing a long-established program that improves U.S.-China understanding is dangerous at a time of heightened bilateral tensions. Senator Rubio is not necessarily wrong to suggest China is no longer a developing country. The Peace Corps, however, is the wrong target. Only one part of its mission relates to development work. The Peace Corps should remain in China to fulfill its two other goals: "to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served" and "to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans."<sup>6</sup> These aims are important, especially in times of disagreement and heightened bilateral tensions.

Compared to similar programs, the Peace Corps is a cost-effective way to improve American understanding in other regions. In the 2019 fiscal year, the Peace Corps China program cost taxpayers only \$4.1 million.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, the U.S. Agency for Global Media spends over \$12 million each year on news broadcasting in Cuba, another country deemed "hostile" to U.S. in-

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terests.<sup>8</sup> Each of the 130 volunteers in China this year taught and interacted with hundreds of students and teachers each year, achieving its strategic goals at a low cost.

The Peace Corps helps Chinese citizens to develop a sophisticated understanding of the United States beyond the state-controlled media narrative. For instance, consider the average person in a rural Guizhou village who cannot afford to travel abroad. A Peace Corps volunteer is often the first American that a person in rural China ever meets. Volunteers do not just teach English: they share stories about American culture, screen films, and provide a human face to a far-away country. It is in the U.S. interest for the 41 percent of

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the Chinese population living in rural areas to understand Americans beyond government officials, movie personalities, and others portrayed in Chinese media.<sup>9</sup>

Truly strong and strategic foreign policy is culturally-informed. Over 350,000 Chinese students currently study in U.S. colleges and universities.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the 2017-2018

academic year, only about 12,000 American students studied in China.<sup>11</sup> Future Chinese leaders surge ahead in this area, understanding the United States better than many future U.S. leaders understand China. Even President Xi sent his daughter to study in the United States.<sup>12</sup> He is not alone among Chinese leaders. Given China's importance to the international order, the United States needs leaders who speak Mandarin Chinese, understand Chinese communication styles and cultural values, and have traveled to regions of China outside of Beijing and Shanghai. Peace Corps volunteers not only help the average Chinese citizen learn about the United States, but also gain invaluable experience in China. Many return to the United States and use this knowledge in global careers.

Why should policymakers use the Peace Corps to address the critical lack of American expertise in China? In addition to its low cost, it allows for deep

and long-term community immersion, which is rare in international exchange programs. This is especially true in the least developed parts of China, such as the province in which I served. Peace Corps volunteers serve for two years at local living standards, supporting themselves on a modest stipend. This allows for interpersonal exchange not possible in short-term teaching contracts or study abroad programs, which send Americans to major Chinese cities.

Peace Corps volunteers do impactful work teaching English, sharing American culture, and learning about China all at the same time. Given that the U.S.-China relationship is critical to international relations, even Senator Rubio should recognize the need for a more nuanced understanding of China and Chinese culture. The U.S. government should bring the Peace Corps back to China. ■

2009-201 Peace Corps Volunteers play Mahjong with their Chinese students. Photo by U.S. Peace Corps.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ENDNOTES

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