

An Interview with Zheng Xu, A Visiting Scholar at Huamin Research Center, Rutgers University

Shuang Lu, Huamin Research Center

As a doctoral student at the School of Public Policy and Management of Tsinghua University, Zheng Xu focuses on the incubation and cultivation of social organizations' in their initial phases, nonprofit organization management and relevant social policy research over recent years. Zheng had a preliminary understanding of U.S. civil society and democracy from Alexis de Tocqueville's books. He has always wanted to experience and learn from the operation of government and nonprofit organizations in the United States, where civil society is under rapid development. In May 2012, as a student representative at the Center for Social Responsibility and Innovation, Zheng interacted Rutgers School of Social Work, China Study Abroad Program participants. Through this exchange experience, his mentor Professor Guosheng Deng also established a formal exchange partnership with the Huamin Research Center of Rutgers University. Over the following year, the two research centers jointly published a series of studies and translated literature. In May 2013, Zheng visited Rutgers University with a group of the China Nonprofit Organization Leadership Training Program. In that trip, he developed a better understanding of the state government of New Jersey, non-profit organizations and Huamin Research Center. In October 2013, referred by Tsinghua University and receiving support from the China Scholarship Council, Zheng started his six-month visit at Huamin Research Center.

Zheng adapted himself to the new environment soon after he arrived the U.S. In six months, he gained a lot from attending classes, academic research and field visits. A series of nonprofit training and exchange activities, organized by Huamin Research Center, became a channel for Zheng to explore the United States, which promoted him to look for approaches to combine the American experience with China's context. For example, through a visit to the New Jersey State government, he identified two important elements when the government establishes partnerships with NGOs. One is that NGOs should reach the project's compliance and be able to complete the expected objects. Another one is that an equal relationship should be built between NGOs and the government; the two partners should work together to solve problems and face challenges. This nonprofit-government collaborative pattern is still in its beginning stage in China. Although concerned by scholars and the society in a large scale, this pattern lacks specific regulations and operational experience in China. Later, Zheng introduced the New Jersey state government's experience to his colleagues in Center for Social Responsibility and Innovation of Tsinghua University, which brought in a new perspective to the center's research.

When doing community field research in China, Zheng found that many residents lack enthusiasm for public affairs participation, which brings obstacles for social organization's development. However, when he attended the township council meeting in Highland Park, New Jersey, Zheng found that the majority of the committee members were composed of voluntary local residents, he was inspired by the resident's incredible participatory spirits in community public affairs and the democratic participation form in residents self-governance. The experience gave him a better understanding of American democracy as described by Tocqueville.

During the six-month exchange and study in the United States, Zheng also made a breakthrough in his academic research. A few years ago, introduced by Professor Chien-Chung

Huang, the Director of Huamin Research Center, Zheng met with Professor Andy Germak and Professor Jeffrey Robinson from Rutgers University, who were giving lectures on social entrepreneurship in Beijing. While Zheng was in the United States, Huamin Research Center was collaborating with Professor Germak and Professor Pobinson on a social enterprise research project. Zheng joined the research team and completed the paper *For Love or Money? Achievement Orientation, Non-monetary Focus and the Nascent Social Entrepreneur*, which supports the emerging research field of social enterprises in China and the United States. Zheng has improved his capacity on statistical analysis and English writing skills with the support of the research team and staff in Huamin Research Center. As of now, the paper is presented at the doctoral student forum in School of Public Policy and Management of Tsinghua University. It was also presented at the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action(ARNOVA) Annual Meeting in November 2014.

During his visit in the United States, attending courses was a challenge to Zheng. “Actually, when I came here in Fall, 2013, I was worried about my English, and I was afraid of being unable to understand the lectures”, Zheng recalled, “luckily, a colleague at Huamin Research Center recommended me Professor Waldman’s class, Management Practice and Theory. This course was related to my field of study. Professor Waldman’s lectures were understandable and interesting. Additionally, he integrated his rich government working experience in his lectures, which really caught my attention. Two of my colleagues at Huamin Research Center attended this class with me. They were always willing to help me with my confusions, which relieved my anxieties and worries.”

After taking the Management Practice and Theory class, Zheng chose Professor Robinson’s class, Social Enterprise and Venture Philanthropy, and Professor Zippay’s class, Qualitative Research method in the second semester. The content of Professor Robinson’s class is closely related to Zheng’s ongoing social entrepreneur research. Later on, the data he collected in this class formed the basis of his study of social entrepreneurs’ motives.

Meanwhile, after learning about a variety of qualitative research methods in Professor Zippay’s class, Zheng determined the direction for his doctoral dissertation, which is studying the mechanisms of government fostering social organization through the Grounded Theory approach. “This course is very precious. Although I took a social science research methods course in Tsinghua University, that course was not enough as it was on an introductory level. The course involved research design, questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews and so on forth. Only four sessions were about qualitative research, which was far from adequate. I had a preliminary understanding of these methods, but I had no idea how to use them in research”, Zheng recalled, “however, Professor Zippay spent the whole semester on this topic. The content included almost everything about qualitative research, such as its history, design, theory, data collection, data analysis, results writing, and how to conduct qualitative data analysis with relevant software. So to speak, Professor Zippay’s class granted me a complete and comprehensive guidance.

After returning to Tsinghua University, Zheng organized his course materials and delivered a lecture on qualitative methods at the Center for Social Responsibility and Innovation, which received very positive feedbacks faculty and students from the school. “Many students in my

school hoped that I can talk with them about qualitative research methods when they knew that I took this course in the United States. Generally speaking, many scholars in China are very interested in qualitative research methods now, but there is no channel for us to learn it systematically. This systematic and well-developed qualitative research method system I learnt in Rutgers University has now been widely spread in our School.

Zheng experienced confusion and bewilderment when he first arrived in the United States. “Actually, I did not have a clear idea of how to study China’s issues in the U.S. I did not know how to complete my doctoral dissertation, and I was still looking for ideas for it when I was in the U.S.” Required by the Qualitative Research Methods course, Zheng interviewed four NGO leaders in China. During the interview process, Zheng gradually became clear with his research topic and decided to collect data for his doctoral dissertation through qualitative research methods. Within two months after returning, Zheng had visited social organization’s incubation base in Chengdu and Nanchang, “my study is very specific with clear purpose this time, since I already thought through this idea when I was in the United States.”

In addition to study and research, how to integrate into local society and culture was also a very big challenge to international students like Zheng. “Due to the physical distance and time difference, I felt like I suddenly lost contact with my friends in China”, Zheng recalled, “however, this was not a great challenge to me since members of Huamin Research Center gathered together very often. My colleagues and faculty advisors helped me a lot in both academic research and daily life.” When asked about his most impressive experience in Huamin Research Center, Zheng mentioned: “I still remember once my colleagues at the center decorated the office for Dr. Huang together when he was coming back from Shanghai. I was a little surprised but deeply touched at that time. The relationship between students and professors in China is not as close as it is here. Usually we meet together for discussions and research only.” From Zheng’s perspective, team spirit and tense but vigorous working atmosphere is one of the advantages of Huamin Research Center.

To Zheng, six-month visit was like “living in another world for half a year”. This experience changed his thoughts about civil society development and also profoundly impacted his life. “The biggest gain from this experience is that it expanded my vision”, Zheng said, “In many cases, we view U.S. experience as our benchmark for reference. After living for several months in the United States, I found the reasons why its local democratic governance system developed so well. It is because of its unique advantages, such as geographical environment, population size, and level of economy. When it comes to democratic participation in urban governance in China, I realized that although we can learn ideas and methods from the U.S, it is impractical to directly apply specific U.S. models to Chinese society.”

As for future plans, Zheng hopes to collaborate with some universities or research institutes to continue his research in the nonprofit management field, especially in this era with increasing social problems. His research will focus on how to develop social organizations in their startup stage, how to provide public service and alleviate social conflicts, and how to make civil society play a more important role. “More importantly, now I can focus my research not only in China, but also in a global context. Continuing doing research with Huamin Research Center and

introducing other countries' advanced experience into China are the two things that I plan for next five or ten years.”

As a former member of Huamin Research Center, Zheng hopes the center will continue to play the role as a platform for China-U.S. communication and exchange. Zheng hopes that the center will introduce China's exploratory experience to the U.S. and brings in U.S. new models and philosophies to China. Finally, Zheng expects that Huamin Research Center will enhance its influences through these exchanges and therefore play a more important role in disseminating and adapting U.S. Experience in China.



Zheng Xu participating the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action(ARNOVA) 42nd Annual Meeting.



Xu Zheng and Waldman, Professor of School of Social Work, Rutgers University.



Field research at Foundation Center in New York.



Group picture with members of Huamin Research Center at the American Association for Chinese Studies(AACS) 55th Annual Meeting.