

Dr Shum paying a visit to over 100 families in the hardest-hit disaster areas during the Rebuild Sichuan Volunteer Programme—Caring Trip to Sichuan



The untold tale behind volunteering: an interview with Dr Chi-wang Shum

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To most of us, volunteering is easy as long as we have the time and strength to spare—we show up, follow the manual, then break a sweat with our family and friends and fellow co-workers with a smile. Although we are familiar with similar volunteering journeys of frontline volunteers, few know about the individuals who mastermind successful volunteer campaigns from the very beginning. Dr Chi-wang Shum, the current Chairman of the Agency for Volunteer Service (AVS), tells us in this featured article how the volunteering journey can be a completely different story for an organiser.

The common goal

Dr Shum, who is a dental surgeon, also a father and grandfather, has been altruistic since he was a student. He began volunteering while pursuing his dentistry degree in the United Kingdom. After graduating, he returned to Hong Kong in 1967 to work and take care of his parents. Once settled in Hong Kong, the first thing Dr Shum did was to find somewhere to volunteer. He saw this as providing some relief from stressful work. Preferring to make the most out of his professional skills, he started volunteering at the St John's Ambulance, offering dental services to fellow Hongkongers who lived on remote islands and the mentally handicapped. He also participated in voluntary campaigns in Mainland China alongside local dentists. After three decades of frontline voluntary work, Dr Shum was invited in 1999 to join the Board of the AVS. He held

the post of Vice-Chairman from 2002 until 2017 when he became Chairman.

Dr Shum gains huge satisfaction from volunteering, where everyone strives for one common goal—the betterment of society. This coincides with the Agency's vision to “promote and develop sustainable volunteerism for the building of a civil society and caring community”. He stated that there are few conflicts of interest when people work for the common good rather than for themselves, and he enjoys working in such a peaceful work environment with a motivated and united team. “The same applies to our society,” he added. “If people realised that we are all in the same boat, there would definitely be less chaos.”

A change in role

Despite his long years of dedicated community service, Dr Shum's passion for volunteering has never wavered. At his peak he devoted himself to volunteering on the frontline in most of his free time. However, with work, family and other physical constraints, Dr Shum can no longer afford such a degree of involvement. Since joining the AVS, Dr Shum has discovered a new role in helping with its administration. Yet, he realised that professional training and experience was required to oversee the organisation's administration. Hence, he has been continuously acquiring various different skillsets, ranging from interpersonal and management skills to knowledge about logistics and human resources.

This posed a huge challenge to him. After a lot of thought, he mustered the courage to step out of his comfort zone. This eventually brought him to another peak of his volunteering career.

The AVS provides an array of services and programmes. Their volunteer referral service helps novices in volunteering start by matching their skillset to services provided. Since 1998, the AVS has also been working with Hong Kong Correctional Services that distributes holiday greeting cards and educational materials made by the inmates to non-governmental organisations and schools. The AVS also partners with the United Nations Volunteers and every year students from local universities have the chance of volunteering for 6 months in South-East Asia under this programme. Although it is impossible for Dr Shum to meet every single member of every party involved, he believes he can learn something from those he meets.

“Being the organiser of an event is a lot different to just participating in one.” Dr Shum stated while continuing to describe hardships he had encountered. It has always been hard to raise funding, be it government subsidies or public donations. “People are seldom convinced that a voluntary agency like ours needs money to operate, saying that volunteers should not ask for monetary rewards.” While it is true that the Agency recruits volunteers for manpower, it still has operational costs if it is to function and full-time staff require a salary. Dr Shum has seldom acknowledged these challenges as an outsider, a mere participant. As the Chairman of the AVS, Dr Shum not only attends the events but also helps publicise them to potential sponsors and the general public. Dr Shum could easily spend several days a week meeting sponsors and colleagues outside of his daily dental practice. Only with such dedication can Dr Shum and his colleagues help provide such a variety of services at the AVS.

Nonetheless there is a lot more to consider as an organiser. Despite limited resources, Dr Shum and his colleagues have never ceased to strive for improvement, even in minor respects. He quoted the example of distributing festive packages to the elderly: common practice would be to make the elderly queue up and wait, a method that saves time and effort. A considerate organiser should, however, acknowledge the risk that the elderly may trip over one another while queuing, and experience physical discomfort from waiting for too long. “Why not deliver the packages to their doorstep when you have the manpower?” To Dr Shum, volunteering should not be an indulgence or a means of satisfying the ego of the privileged and empowered. It should instead be an opportunity to step into another’s shoes and be aware of their needs and concerns.

Embracing diversity

Volunteering is not just one party helping another; instead, it has always been mutually beneficial. One particular benefit for Dr Shum is gaining a better understanding of our society through identifying and addressing the needs of different stakeholders. He has been constantly amazed and inspired by acts of his fellow volunteers, especially those who help the underprivileged but who have often been rejected by conventional volunteer agencies because of polarisation or stigma. Such neglect and alienation is sadly still common in the city as agencies have their own niche: some do not recognise or serve sexual minorities because of their religious beliefs. Others choose not to work with drug addicts because of concerns about hygiene and safety. “Volunteers who overcome these misconceptions and prejudices to serve minorities are worth our appreciation”, said Dr Shum.

In addition, the diversity lies also among the volunteers themselves. Dr Shum is often blown away by how far some of his fellow volunteers are willing to go, despite physical disabilities or lack of resources. He is also astounded by the way people from different social classes choose to be involved in voluntary work. An example he quoted was the experience of retired company CEOs who, rather than directly fund the organisation, choose instead to volunteer as tour guides under the Volunteer Talent Bank of the AVS, taking the frail elderly people to explore the city while recollecting their memories of Hong Kong’s history. The list could go on and on.

In hopes of recognising such volunteers and showcasing the diversity of volunteering, Dr Shum helped launch the biennial Hong Kong Volunteer Award in 2005, where he and his fellow committee members select and honour the most outstanding volunteers and groups of the city and help spread their message. They aim to broaden the public’s perspective of volunteering, and in turn encourage more people to participate and even initiate acts of altruism. Running the award has nonetheless been one of the most difficult tasks for him over the years of volunteering, as he and his colleagues can pick only ten from a much larger number of distinguished candidates. It has always been difficult for them to leave someone out. Nonetheless the volunteers have never been discouraged and every year they achieve more and more.

What’s next?

Dr Shum admits that he is getting older and is less able to perform the intense field work so he is devoting more of his time to working behind the scenes. Unlike a participant, the organiser does not often come into direct contact with the beneficiary,

receiving less direct feedback from those who are helped. It took time for Dr Shum to learn to embrace this, but he still enjoys frontline volunteer services by attending volunteer events, such as charity runs, with his family. He not only considers volunteering as his second career, but also as a way to connect with his family and the next generation. Other than his work at the AVS, Dr Shum is also a mentor to students at the University of Hong Kong. He always looks forward to meeting his mentees as it acts as a great means by which he can understand the opportunities and challenges of the younger generation.

Considering how the current youth are so busy with work, with little time to rest let alone volunteer, Dr Shum suggests they start with small steps close to home. For example, they could start by visiting the elderly people and homeless in the neighbourhood after work and help distributing gifts to them. Although these are obviously the most conventional forms of volunteering, we should not underestimate their impact. They may be game-changing. The youth of today should take the initiative and step out of their comfort zone. Dr Shum concluded by saying, “The act of volunteerism may be frustrating at times, but if you treat it as one of your other pastimes instead of gruelling labour, you will find your shoulders lightened and gain immeasurable benefit.”



(top) Dr Shum speaking at the 7th Hong Kong Volunteer Award Presentation Ceremony when he was Chairman of its organising committee
 (bottom) Dr Shum at the Volunteer Service for Elderly in celebration of Mother's Day and Father's Day as well as the Dragon Boat Festival organised by the Hong Kong Volunteer Awardees Society