



Trans/Form/Ação

ISSN: 0101-3173

ISSN: 1980-539X

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Departamento de Filosofia

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Trans/Form/Ação, vol. 46, Esp., 2023, pp. 205-210

Universidade Estadual Paulista, Departamento de Filosofia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2023.v46esp.p205>

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COMMENT ON
“HOW PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS INFLUENCE THE UNITED STATES: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON PRAGMATISM”

Zhi Li¹

Commented Article: YE, Long; LIAO, Zhihua; YU, Yuanyuan Yu. How peace corps volunteers influence the United States: an analysis based on pragmatism. **Trans/Form/Ação**: Unesp journal of philosophy, v. 46, Special Issue, p. 185- 204, 2023.

From the perspective of pragmatism, the article is based on the Peace Corps officials and volunteers' monographs, memoirs, official documents and investigation reports. Ye et. al. (2023) analyze the impact of the cultural adaptation experience of the host country on the Peace Corps volunteers, as well as the Peace Corps volunteers' impact on the Chinese society and diplomacy of the United States, to fully understand the significance of Peace Corps to the United States (Title “How Peace Corps volunteers influence the United States: an analysis based on pragmatism”).

Peace Corps is a foreign aid agency established by the Kennedy Administration for third-world countries and regions, which is regarded as the symbol of the foreign policy of the Kennedy Administration. It aims to help recipient countries achieve development and enter the ranks of modernization early by providing medium human resources as its assistance content.

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2023.v46esp.p205>



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When the idea of the Peace Corps was first put forward, it was warmly responded to by the Chinese people and other countries and thus rapidly developed to its peak in the 1960s. Later, affected by its shortcomings and the change of the US foreign strategy and other factors, the Peace Corps merged with the organization “Volunteers Serving the United States” into a “volunteer action” organization during the Nixon Administration, losing its independent status and experiencing a depression period of more than ten years. Reagan restored the independent status of the Peace Corps and expanded its financial budget after he became President of the United States (ARNDT, 2006, p. 39). The United States government has begun to focus on and develop the Peace Corps again. Today, the Peace Corps has a history of more than 60 years, covering more than 60 countries and regions around the world, and has made fruitful achievements in the recipient countries, both locally and internationally.

Through technical help, the Peace Corps attempts to lay the groundwork for future initiatives. A substantial number of returned Peace Corps volunteers have penetrated all facets of American culture, exerting diverse influences. After returning home, an increasing number of volunteers choose to continue working for nonprofit organizations. This enables many returning volunteers in the United States to continue utilizing the work methods and abilities they acquired in their host nation (CROSS, 1998, p. 31). These volunteers share their experiences with the people they meet in their posts. Their experience in the Peace Corps has improved international and cultural awareness and it is important for solving problems and influencing the people and society around them.

Returned volunteers share their service experience in the host country, and families are the most common target. This sharing method not only enables their families to have a deeper understanding of the social culture of the host country but also attracts them to join the Peace Corps and achieve sustainable results. During their service in the host country, the Peace Corps volunteers won the hearts of the United States hearts through friendly exchanges with the local people, thus gaining soft power. They are important practitioners of American cultural diplomacy. Moreover, after returning to the United States, they continued to provide high-quality talents and intellectual support for the traditional diplomacy and cultural diplomacy of that country.

The Peace Corps volunteers’ volunteer status in the host country helps them maintain a symmetrical attitude when communicating with

local people. The volunteers' work in the host country is not easy to have a considerable impact on the overall development of the host country. Still, they enter the host country to serve the locals in the name of assistance (HUNTINGTON, 1993, p. 22). In addition, due to the cultural adaptation strategies adopted by volunteers in the host country, the information exchange between volunteers and local people is often two-way and balanced. Volunteers adopt integration strategies conducive to assimilation in their daily life. Local people feel that volunteers respect their culture, so they are more willing to communicate and show their social culture to volunteers. These ones often adopt an integration strategy biased towards separation so that the local people can fully understand the American work style and cultural characteristics without being challenged by the dominant position. The strategy of religious separation can further alleviate the local people and volunteers' worries.

In the actual implementation process, the Peace Corps also exposed its shortcomings, which mainly include that the policies jointly formulated by the government and universities for the recipient countries are not consistent with the actual situation of the recipient countries. The aid work is difficult to be carried out smoothly and effectively (PEACE, 1967, p. 67). After entering the recipient country, the volunteers encountered a strong impact of foreign cultures, which harmed the smooth implementation of the work and personal mentality.

Undoubtedly, in the early days of the Peace Corps, the American government and the Chinese people achieved a good rapport. As a new and meaningful policy, the Peace Corps aroused the American people's enthusiasm as soon as it was put forward. The great attention of the government and the people's passionate pursuit have united the two ones closely. "Many Americans, especially young people, are eager to see whether American affairs overseas can be handled better than those described in *The Ugly American*, and are willing to participate in the task of 'advancing the United States'."

In general, the exchange between the volunteers and the local people can affect people in different fields over a long period. They are asymmetric in personnel flow but symmetrical in information flow and communication attitude. In other words, the Peace Corps volunteers can bring ideal cultural diplomacy effects to the United States.

Returning volunteers, who enter the foreign affairs division of the federal government of the United States, may have academic advantages in the language and socio-cultural understanding of emerging nations. If they are sent to the country in which they served, they will be able to communicate effectively with the locals and provide a more reliable foundation for U.S. foreign policy. Numerous returning volunteers believe that their service experience in the host country has influenced the former volunteers' political or congressional careers, who served in relevant foreign affairs departments or the United States Department of State, thereby impacting the foreign policy and national security of the United States. Therefore, the Peace Corps volunteers have a comprehensive influence on US foreign policy.

The basic goal of the Kennedy administration in establishing the Peace Corps is to help the recipient countries achieve social development and local progress. The ultimate goal is to “modernize the recipient countries” (that is, modernize the United States as the standard) and leads the recipient countries in “social and cultural change”. At the same time, the Kennedy government also hoped that the appearance of the Peace Corps could alleviate other negative evaluations caused by the bad behaviors of the United States, such as political intervention and war in the world. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, the Peace Corps will exert such influence (PEACE, 1967, p. 104). The Peace Corps has indeed achieved some early successes in Southeast Asia, but these successes are limited to short-term objectives such as infrastructure development. Due to the time-sensitive nature of the majority of the objectives of the Peace Corps for recipient nations, its final function is impossible to be fulfilled in a few short years. As for the political hopes of the Kennedy administration for the Peace Corps, due to some of its faults and the anti-Americans' boycott, the government lost its independent position as an institution until the end of the 1960s, and the Peace Corps did not accomplish the desired outcomes.

Peace Corps was a measure implemented by the Kennedy administration during the Cold War to export the American model of democracy and social development and expand the camp of the free world. It uses slogans such as “democracy, freedom and development” to connect the American people with the government so that the United States can unite in a strong idealistic atmosphere (RICE, 1985, p. 286). However, in Southeast Asia, a contradiction-prone region, the Peace Corps gradually became vulnerable under the test of a complex reality. The volunteers also had conflicts and

opposition with the government. Looking back on the history of the Peace Corps in Southeast Asia in the 1960s, it can be found that, except for some successes in infrastructure construction, the Peace Corps in Southeast Asia did not give full play to the high expectations of the American government on the cold war policy in Southeast Asia and the future development of this region, that is, “[...] leading local cultural changes and realizing modernization”, nor did it improve the image of the United States in the minds of anti-American people. Due to its failure to play an adequate role, it was in great trouble in the later period (SCHNEIDER, 2006, p. 191). This institution encountered essential reform after the Nixon Administration came to power in the late 1960s (WU, 2022, p. 1).

After Blanchford, the commander in chief of the Peace Corps, reformed it during the Nixon administration, the Peace Corps gradually changed from idealism to pragmatism, and its cold war color also gradually weakened. Today, the Peace Corps has also made remarkable achievements in the world. However, the current peace corps is still an important way for the United States to export its own culture to foreign countries. Therefore, the status and role of the Peace Corps in today’s US foreign policy cannot be underestimated, and its actual role must be tested over time.

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Received: 12/12/2022

Approved: 20/12/2022