

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impact of “Sanxiaxiang” Social Practice on the Educational Effects among Chinese Undergraduates in Yunnan: The Moderating Effect of Community Support

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ABSTRACT

The study's objectives were to: (1) ascertain the influence of Sanxiaxiang social practice, community support, and educational impact on Chinese undergraduate students in Yunnan; (2) ascertain the relationship between Sanxiaxiang social practice and educational impact; and (3) ascertain the significance of community support as a moderating variable. 834 undergraduate students from three Yunnan institutions served as the study's subjects. Additionally, the questionnaires were used to gather the data, and AMOS was used for the analysis of the data using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and structural equation modeling (SEM). An evaluation of the measuring scales' internal consistency revealed that it was high (Cronbachs α = 0.93 -0.87). A reasonable model fit was shown by the model fit indices (χ^2/df = 2.31, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.041). The results demonstrated that participation's duration, frequency, and intensity significantly and favorably affects academic results. Support from the community also improved these connections, showing a strong moderating influence.

Keywords: Yunnan undergraduates; Sanxiaxiang social practice; the influence of education; community support; and structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

The goal of the 1996 and 1997 nationwide implementations of the Sanxiaxiang social practice was to connect college students with rural development initiatives by facilitating healthcare, culture, and technology [1,2]. Over the past two decades, the Communist Youth League institutionalized the program, organizing student teams for summer fieldwork through structured processes of training, needs assessment, service, and long-term cooperation^[3]. The Rural Revitalization Strategy has been emphasized as a key national priority to address persistent rural challenges such as lack of technology, labor loss, and urban-rural disparities [4,5]. In this context, the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice where university students participate in rural service has become a crucial educational and developmental tool. Universities are expected to provide technological, cultural, and talent support [6]. Collaboration between universities and rural communities is essential for maximizing the outcomes of these practices, both for student education and rural development. The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice significantly enhances the educational outcomes of college students by

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fostering knowledge application and innovation, all-round personal development, and civic responsibility [7]. In short, the “Sanxiaxiang” initiative aligns with the Rural Revitalization Strategy by not only benefiting rural communities but also shaping college students into responsible, skilled, and socially engaged citizens. Research on college students’ “Sanxiaxiang” social practice mainly focuses on developed southeastern coastal areas, with little attention to underdeveloped western regions like Yunnan [8]. Most prior research emphasizes the significance, problems, and management of the program, but few examine its educational effects, particularly how participation duration, frequency, and intensity influence students’ growth. Therefore, this study investigates the impact of “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on the educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan, focusing on the moderating role of community support. Data are collected from both students and faculty advisors to ensure validity and reliability. Data were collected from students and faculty advisors to enhance reliability.

1.1. Research questions

1. How do Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan have “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects?
2. How does the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice influence its educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan?
3. How does community support moderate variable influence the “Sanxiaxiang” Social Practice and its educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan?

1.2. Research objectives

1. To identify the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.
2. To analyze the impact of the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on the educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.
3. To examine community support as a moderating variable in “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on its educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

1.3. Research hypotheses

H1: the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects of Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan are at high levels.

H2: The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice has correlation with the educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

H3: Community support has moderating effect in “Sanxiaxiang” social practice and its educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

2. Literature review

2.1. Related theories

Social Practice: Social practice for Chinese college students involves organized activities that combine theory and practice to foster social responsibility, professional skills, and personal growth. These activities include internships, surveys, volunteer work, productive labor, and programs like “Sanxiaxiang” [9,10]. Rooted in “learning by doing” and “cooperative education”, social practice is supported by universities, governments, and social organizations. It enriches knowledge, develops practical skills, and promotes social responsibility and ideals [7].

Marxist View of Practice: In Marxist philosophy, practice is the core of social life and the basis of knowledge and human development. Marx^[11] emphasized that purposeful, material activity allows humans to transform the world and develop fully. Practice is both the source and test of theory; without it, theory is empty^[12]. Practice-oriented education reflects this by showing that human existence is realized through social practice. Marx and Engels^[13] highlighted that human essence lies in social relations, which are formed and expanded through practice. Therefore, practice drives social progress and individual development.

Marxist Theory on the All-around and Free Development of Human Beings: Marx and Engels envisioned a communist society where individuals freely develop physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Marxism emphasizes freeing people from natural, social, and personal limits to cultivate abilities and harmonious personalities^[14]. It focuses on four areas: meeting material and spiritual needs, developing intellectual and moral abilities, shaping personality through self-awareness, and expanding social relations. In education, Marxism advocates that universities should foster comprehensive abilities through practical learning, not just impart knowledge.

Service Learning: Service-learning is a student-centered approach combining community service with academic learning. It helps students apply knowledge to real-world issues, enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic responsibility through reflection^[15,16]. As both a teaching method and philosophy, it promotes academic success, practical skills, and social awareness. Effective service-learning requires addressing real community needs, fostering university-community partnerships, encouraging student accountability, and providing time for guided reflection^[17].

University Community Partnership: The concept of universities serving communities began with U.S. land-grant colleges. In 1989, the NSIEE outlined effective university-community partnerships, stressing shared goals and community-defined needs^[18]. Such collaboration supports universities' teaching, research, and service missions while enhancing social responsibility. Local communities provide key opportunities for experiential learning and civic engagement. Sustainable development relies on integrating diverse resources, with universities offering unique strengths through ongoing cooperation^[19].

2.2. Related studies

The Educational Effects of College Students' Social Practice: Social practice activities have three main educational effects: applying and innovating knowledge, promoting all-round development, and fostering civic responsibility among university students. Applying knowledge in real-world settings leads to its regeneration, transforming it into capability, wisdom, and innovation. Luo and Shi^[20] emphasize that practical experience shapes thoughts and behaviors, supporting students' holistic and healthy growth. Liao^[21] adds that social practice strengthens students' sense of social responsibility and national identity.

Significance of the “Sanxiaxiang” Social Practice: The Sanxiaxiang social practice cultivates college students' social responsibility by engaging them with communities and promoting civic awareness^[22]. It develops practical skills, teamwork, and adaptability through real-world challenges^[23], while supporting personal growth in communication, leadership, and innovation^[24]. The program aids rural revitalization by applying student knowledge in education, healthcare, and culture and fosters urban-rural exchange, enhancing mutual understanding and social cohesion.

The Measurements of College Students' Social Practice: Research on college students' social practice identifies issues like repetitive content, poor organization, limited support, and weak evaluation^[25]. Students' involvement will be influenced by a variety of factors, such as their major, academic year, performance measures, past experience, training opportunities, and outside help^[26]. The manner in which a learner develops, acquires knowledge and attains new skills is actually pegged on his or her origin and the

perceptions that they have towards things. School systems should be improved, more training should be provided, more money should be provided, and the overall emphasis on all the areas of development should be made to ensure that this form of engagement is effective^[27].

University-community partnerships (UCPs) are one of the possible ways to address such social issues as poverty and unequal education. Such collaborations imply the division of tasks and the engagement of the entire community^[28]. By incorporating service projects into the curriculum that are grounded on real-life use, they are able to enrich learning opportunities offered to students and make them feel accountable members of their community^[29]. UCPs are also useful in research and cross-subject collaboration and ideas. The colleges and universities that leap into UCPs consider the community equal to others, and this implies that they share knowledge, giving back to the community. UCPs will benefit long-term development of services, expansion of resources, policy formation and responsive education^[30].

Service learning has important educational implications since it develops knowledge acquisition among students, holism and civic responsibility.

It boosts academic motivation, deepens course understanding, and connects theory with practice through real-world experience and reflection^[31]. Engaging with social issues develops critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills^[32]. It also enhances self-esteem, leadership, and adaptability, especially for marginalized students. Additionally, service-learning fosters civic awareness and social responsibility, encouraging community engagement and a sense of national duty.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Population and sample

The study population consisted of approximately 2,800 undergraduates from three universities in Yunnan representing the eastern, central, and western regions, respectively, who had participated in the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice. Using Yamane’s formula with a 0.04 error level, a sample of 834 sophomores, juniors, and seniors were selected, excluding freshmen due to lack of relevant experience. Sample selection considered gender, major, and grade to ensure representativeness and validity.

3.2. Research instrument

Questionnaires were used as the primary data collection tool, consisting of four sections: undergraduate background, social practice participation, community support, and educational effects. Background information included gender, grade, and major (3 items). Social practice participation was measured by duration, frequency, and intensity (16 items). Community support assessed material, emotional, and informational aspects (9 items). Educational effects focused on knowledge application and innovation, overall development and growth, and civic responsibility (36 items). The last three sections used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to evaluate participation, community support, and educational effects.

3.3. Instrument reliability and validity

The questionnaire items were adapted from validated instruments used in prior research on social practice and community support^[7,34]. To ensure content validity, three subject-matter experts reviewed and refined all items. A pilot test involving 80 undergraduates was conducted prior to the main survey. Cronbach’s alpha values for the subscales were as follows: social practice participation = 0.89, community support = 0.87, and educational effects = 0.93, indicating excellent internal consistency. Exploratory and

confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the three-factor structure ($KMO = 0.91$, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity $p < 0.001$), verifying the construct validity of the instrument.

3.4. Data analysis

Descriptive Statistics: Mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentage values.

Inferential Statistics: SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) software were used for data analysis, as well as for generating visual representations such as charts and graphs.

3.5. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and model fit

The relationships among variables were examined through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS 24. Model fit was evaluated using standard indices. The results demonstrated a satisfactory fit: $\chi^2/df = 2.31$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94, Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.92, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.048, and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.041. These values met recommended thresholds^[35], indicating that the model fit the observed data well.

4. Results

4.1. Result of descriptive analysis

In the research, frequency analysis is conducted on questions related to basic information of 834 undergraduates. The basic information of the respondents is as follows.

Table 1. Undergraduates' background information

Items	Classification	No.	Percentage (%)
1. Gender	Female	571	68.47
	Male	263	31.53
2. Major	Sciences	189	22.66
	Engineering	158	18.94
	Liberal Arts	392	47.00
3. Grade	Others	95	11.39
	Junior	280	33.57
	Sophomore	295	35.37
	Senior	259	31.06

Among undergraduates participating in the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, females dominate (68.47%), and liberal arts students have the highest participation (47%), followed by sciences (22.66%) and engineering (18.94%). Sophomore and junior students are the main participants, accounting for 35.37% and 33.57%, respectively, while seniors make up 31.06%.

4.2. Result of hypotheses testing

1) to identify the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects of Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

H1: The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects of Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan are at high levels.

H1a: The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice is at a high level.

H1b: Community Support is at high level.

H1c: Education Effects are at high level.

Table 2. Means of “Sanxiaxiang” social practice

Dimension	\bar{X}	S	Level
Participation Duration	3.38	1.15	moderate
Participation Frequency	3.33	1.17	moderate
Participation Intensity	3.38	1.14	moderate
Total	3.37	1.16	moderate

Table 2 indicates that the descriptive statistics of the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice are at moderate level ($\bar{X} = 3.37$, $S = 1.16$). Specifically, duration ($\bar{X} = 3.38$, $S = 1.15$), frequency ($\bar{X} = 3.33$, $S = 1.17$), and participation intensity ($\bar{X} = 3.38$, $S = 1.14$) are all at moderate levels, rejecting H1a.

Table 3. Means of community support

Dimension	\bar{X}	S	Level
Emotional Support	3.40	1.17	high
Material Support	3.40	1.20	high
Informational Support	3.42	1.18	high
Total	3.41	1.19	high

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of Community Support are at a high level ($\bar{X} = 3.41$, $S = 1.19$). Specifically, emotional support ($\bar{X} = 3.40$, $S = 1.17$), material support ($\bar{X} = 3.40$, $S = 1.20$), and informational support ($\bar{X} = 3.42$, $S = 1.18$) are at high levels, supporting H1b.

Table 4. Means of the educational effects

Dimension	\bar{X}	S	Level
Knowledge Application and Innovation	3.46	1.19	high
All-round Development and Growth	3.39	1.17	moderate
Civic Responsibility	3.46	1.15	high
Total	3.43	1.16	high

Table 4 indicates that the descriptive statistics of Educational Effects are at high levels ($\bar{X} = 3.43$, $S = 1.16$), with knowledge application and innovation ($\bar{X} = 3.46$, $S = 1.19$), all-round development and growth ($\bar{X} = 3.39$, $S = 1.17$) and civic responsibility ($\bar{X} = 3.46$, $S = 1.15$), supporting H1c.

2) to analyze the impact of the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on the educational effects among undergraduates in Yunnan.

Structural Equation Model Analysis for test H2

H2: The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice has correlation with the educational effects among undergraduates in Yunnan.

H2a: The correlation between participation duration and educational effect is positively significant.

H2b: The correlation between participation frequency and educational effect is positively significant.

H2c: The correlation between participation intensity and educational effect is positively significant.

Table 5. The path coefficient of structural equation model

Structural Equation Path		Non-standard Path Coefficient	S.E.	C.R.	p	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	
Educational Effect	<---	Participation Duration	.236	.038	6.225	***	.296
Educational Effect	<---	Participation Frequency	.290	.040	7.255	***	.355
Educational Effect	<---	Participation Intensity	.186	.031	6.087	***	.250

The structural equation model results show that the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice has a significant positive impact on educational effects. Specifically, participation duration ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$), frequency ($\beta = 0.355$, $p < 0.001$), and intensity ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < 0.001$) are all significantly correlated with educational effects, supporting hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c.

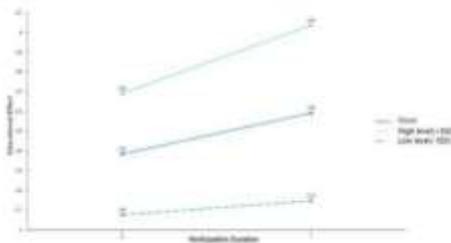
3) to examine community support as a moderating variable in “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on its educational effects among undergraduates in Yunnan.

H3: Community support has moderating effect in “Sanxiaxiang” social practice and its educational effects among undergraduates in Yunnan.

H3a: The moderating effect of community support on participation duration and the educational effects is significant.

H3b: The moderating effect of community support on participation frequency and the educational effects is significant.

H3c: The moderating effect of community support on participation intensity and the educational effects is significant.

**Figure 1.** Moderating effect of community support on the relationship between participation duration and educational effects

{Note: The simple slope graph should show two lines - high community support (steeper slope) and low community support-flatter slope}

Participation Duration: When community support is high, the effect of participation duration on educational effects is significantly stronger. Conversely, when community support is low, this effect is weaker, confirming hypothesis H3a ($t = 6.035$, $p < 0.05$).

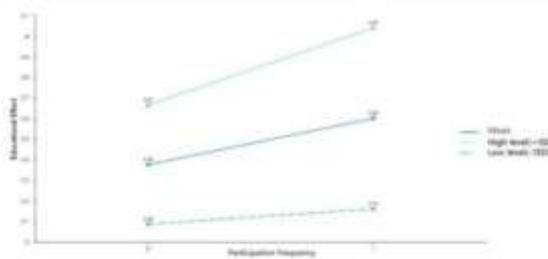


Figure 2. Moderating effect of community support on the relationship between participation frequency and educational effects

(The graph should show that at high community support, frequency has a stronger positive effect on educational outcomes.)

Participation Frequency: Community support moderates the effect of participation frequency on educational effects. At high levels of community support, the impact of participation frequency is substantially greater, while at low levels, the effect is reduced, supporting H3b ($t = 6.796, p < 0.05$).

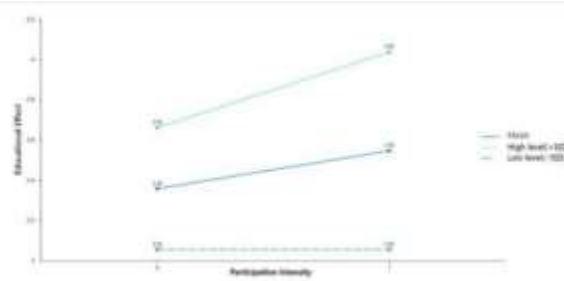


Figure 3. Moderating effect of community support on the relationship between participation intensity and educational effects

(High community support amplifies the positive relationship between participation intensity and educational effects.)

Participation Intensity: Similarly, the influence of participation intensity on educational effects varies with community support. Higher community support amplifies this effect, whereas lower support diminishes it, confirming H3c ($t = 8.064, p < 0.05$).

5. Conclusions

Research Objective 1

To identify the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice, community support and educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

The results of means confirmed H1b and H1c, but not H1a. 1) The “Sanxiaxiang” social practice is at moderate level ($\bar{X}=3.37 S=1.16$), not accepting **H1a**. 2) Community support is at high level ($\bar{X}=3.37 S=1.16$), accepting **H1b**. 3) The educational effects are at high level ($\bar{X}=3.43 S=1.16$), accepting **H1c**.

Research Objective 2

To analyze the impact of the “Sanxiaxiang” social practice on the educational effects among Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan.

The findings following the structural equation modelling show that the Sanxiaxiang social practice has positive but statistically significant influence on educational outcomes. Specifically, participation duration ($\beta=0.296, p < 0.001$), frequency ($\beta = 0.355, p < 0.001$), and intensity ($\beta = 0.250, p < 0.001$) are all significantly correlated with educational effects, supporting **H2a**, **H2b**, and **H2c**.

Research Objective 3

In order to establish the research question, which is the role of community support as a moderating variable in the Sanxiaxiang social practice and its learning impacts on the undergraduates in Yunnan, this study has examined the disparate role of community engagement in determining the outcomes of participation in this program. The results show that the effects of the Sanxiaxiang social practice on the undergraduate education outcomes in Yunnan have significant moderation by the community support. In particular: 1) The impact of the duration of participation on the educational outcome depends on the level of community support: high support enhances the influence of the latter on this outcome, and low support has the opposite effect, which confirms hypothesis H3a ($t=6.035$, $P=0.05$). 2) The support of the communities increases the effects of participation frequency on educational results whereas low support reduces them which supports hypothesis 3b ($t=6.796$, $p= 0.05$). 3) Community support enhances the influence of the intensity of participation on learning results, and the opposite holds true, which boosts hypothesis H3c ($t = 8.064$, $p = 0.05$).

The study, in general, presents strong empirical evidence that confirms that when supported by a solid community involvement, the Sanxiaxiang social practice is an effective channel to experience learning and is one of the factors that will help to revive the rural societies in China.

6. Discussion

This research examined how the involvement on the Sanxiaxiang social practice affected the educational performance of Chinese undergraduates in Yunnan and the moderating effect of community support on the relationship between these two variables. The findings extend prior research by providing quantitative evidence from an underexplored western region of China, where the implementation context of rural engagement differs from that of the eastern coastal provinces.

Research Objective 1: Descriptive Levels of Key Variables

The results revealed that participation in “Sanxiaxiang” social practice was at a moderate level, whereas community support and educational effects were both high. This indicates that while the program has wide participation, practical engagement depth remains limited due to academic workload and logistical barriers^[36]. Nevertheless, the high level of perceived community support reflects that rural communities in Yunnan have increasingly recognized and welcomed student participation, aligning with national policies promoting university–community cooperation.

Research Objective 2: Effects of Participation Dimensions

The positive correlations between participation duration, frequency, and intensity with educational effects confirm that experiential learning leads to meaningful educational outcomes. These findings are consistent with experiential learning theory (Dewey, 1938)¹⁵ and the student involvement model^[37], which both emphasize active engagement as a catalyst for cognitive and social growth. The results suggest that repeated and intensive social practice experiences strengthen students’ self-efficacy, reflective ability, and civic awareness, particularly when these experiences are tied to real community needs^[38].

Research Objective 3: Moderating Role of Community Support

The moderating effects of community support reveal that students achieve stronger learning outcomes when they perceive high emotional, material, and informational support from local communities. This is aligned with ecological models of learning that emphasize the interactive influence of environment and individual engagement^[39]. Supportive community environments not only provide practical resources but also

emotional reinforcement, enhancing students' sense of belonging and purpose^[34]. Therefore, strengthening university–community partnerships is vital to maximize both educational and societal benefits of social practice programs.

Theoretical Implications

This study empirically demonstrates that Marxist and service-learning perspectives converge in the Chinese higher education context. Social practice functions as both a pedagogical and ideological instrument for promoting the all-around development of students and contributing to the Rural Revitalization Strategy. Community support emerges as a key contextual variable that transforms social engagement into educational value, echoing the principles of collaborative education and mutual empowerment^[19].

Practical Implications

Universities should improve the design and duration of “Sanxiaxiang” projects by integrating longer-term service-learning components, providing pre-departure training, and fostering reciprocal partnerships with local communities. Communities, in turn, should be encouraged to offer more structured material and emotional support to participating students. Such collaboration ensures the sustainability of educational and developmental outcomes.

7. Limitations and future research

This study was limited to three universities in Yunnan; future research could expand to other provinces for comparative analysis. Incorporating qualitative interviews could also help capture deeper insights into students' lived experiences. Moreover, examining longitudinal effects would clarify how sustained participation influences career development and civic engagement over time.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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