

My Laidlaw Journey: From research to practice

Being a Laidlaw Scholar over these two years let me know what ethical leadership really means from different angles. In my first year research project, I researched on mentorship programme in East London's media industry and built a website to connect local people who needed help breaking into media with opportunities and resources. This process taught me how to find real problems through conversations with different background of people. During the Oxford Character Leadership Programme, I got the great chance to talk with students from different universities around the world and hear their various perspectives. This helped me understand my own leadership style better and also learning to respect how others think. Everyone's style is different, but now I can put myself in other people's shoes and appreciate different viewpoints. Through each online session, I became more aware of myself and more focused on empathy, caring for others, building relationships, and being resilient. As I believe empathy and resilience are two precious quality that let me have the strength to overcome any challenge. This summer's leadership in action project in Dali gave me more insight regarding ethical leadership means.

Coming to Dali, Yunnan, I felt like entering a world completely different from Hong Kong where I grew up. The pace was much slower and the streets were quieter. When I first went to the Dali Wamao Clay Workshop, I saw rows of Wamao, which are cat-like clay guardians placed on rooftops. They looked both fascinating and unfamiliar. At that time, I felt I had stepped into a very different cultural ground. At the workshop, I learned to make wamao with the artisans. At the beginning I was impatient, as I want to quickly finish a complete piece. But things didn't go smoothly. When I kneaded the clay too fast, it would crack, and when I tried to join pieces, my wamao would collapse. The hardest part was connecting the feet to the mouth. I was always afraid of pressing too hard and breaking what I already made, so I was always hesitated. The artisans told me to apply the pressure following its natural form. That's make me understood that making wamao isn't about how fast I finish it, it's about care and patience. I really felt what "craftsmanship spirit" means. In my interpretation is something you can feel in how you handle the clay, waiting, and trying again after failure.

As I kept learning, I also saw the challenges of this tradition. The artisans told me honestly that few young people want to learn how to make wamao now, because it takes too long and the pays too little. I also met a young learner who had moved to Dali from another city. She tried to combine wamao with paper-cutting technique to create new designs. Some of the older artisans thought this was "not traditional enough," and even she admitted that it was more of a reinterpretation. Standing between her and the older masters, I felt the tension very directly, should I emphasize tradition, or celebrate innovation? If I focused only on innovation, I risked weakening the original meaning of wamao. If I focused only on tradition, it might feel disconnected from modern life and making harder for wamao accept in young public. Facing this contradiction, I gradually understood what ethical leadership really means. It is focusing on listening and understanding and respect different voices, and then making responsible choices. I wrote down what both the artisans and the young learner said, and I tried to show both sides, including wamao's traditional meaning and its contemporary

recreations. For example, when I posted on social media Xiaohongshu. I first introduce wamao as traditional roof guardians, then add how young people today turn them into cultural products or art pieces. I made sure to distinguish between "traditional wamao" and "wamao-inspired creations" to keep information accurate. This helped me figure out my values-driven approach, showing respect in the conflict between tradition and innovation. As an outsider, I learned humility and listening. Rather than commanding, I learned that leadership means facilitating communication and making sure different voices are heard, not controlling or speaking for others.

I also developed a new understanding of global citizenship. Wamao might seem like just a local cultural symbol, but the wish to protect home and pray for peace that it carries is universal. Whether in China, Hong Kong, or anywhere else in the world, people can understand this emotion. I thought about the door gods that Hong Kong people put by their front doors. Their forms are different, but they all express humanity's shared desire for safety and happiness. I think Being a global citizen is being able to put down roots in one place and truly understand and appreciate its culture and then connect the understanding to the broader world. To me, being a global citizen also means having the empathy to connect with the deeper emotions that all humans share.

Looking ahead, I want to keep growing as a better leader. I'll listen deeply when facing cultural differences or value conflicts instead of rushing to judge. I'll be more humble about acknowledging my limitations as an outsider, letting local people take the lead while I serve as a bridge and amplifier. I'll continue sharing culture through digital platforms, but always stick to accuracy and truth. Wamao taught me more than just a craft, it taught me a way of seeing the world. Being patient with tradition and open to change. These experiences let me thought about real leadership is not always directing others but also reflecting my values in daily choices and carrying responsibility in the quiet work of cultural transmission. Overall, I see how each part of the Laidlaw programme has shaped me. The first-year research training my problem solving skill, the Oxford programme helped me reflect on my own character and style, and the summer in Dali gave me the chance to practice ethical leadership in action.