

From Seeds to Table:

A Leadership-in-Action Reflective Essay

Stepping into Yangdong Village in rural Guizhou felt like entering a living storybook – one filled with earnest faces, winding village paths, scent of rice fields, and chirping birds. I arrived as the founder of my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project titled *“From Seeds to Table: Sustainable Agricultural Communities in Rural Guizhou and a Campaign to Promote Local Farmers’ Brands.”* In this six-week experience, our team of ten young volunteers partnered with local residents to bring technology to rural agricultural development. We explored the village’s unique cultural heritage and distinctive agricultural products and applied our digital media skills to help promote local farmers’ brand.

At the heart of this project were two interwoven themes: cultural storytelling and humanity in the age of AI and homogenised content. In today’s world, automated algorithms and AI-generated media often flood us with uniform, generic content. Our work in Guizhou emphasized the irreplaceable value of human stories and local culture. We discovered that sharing a village’s traditions and personal narratives can create an emotional connection far deeper than any mass-produced advertisement. We thus aimed to empower sustainable community development, aligning our efforts with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular, SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) by promoting sustainable agriculture (through seed diversity and organic farming practices) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) by revitalizing a rural community through cultural and economic initiatives.

This reflective essay will explore my LiA journey through the lenses of challenges faced, leadership skills developed, cultural humility, ethical considerations, and collaboration. It will highlight how the human-centric storytelling approach became a guiding light for leadership - one that I believe is crucial for sustainable communities in an AI-driven era.

Challenges Faced: Capturing Authentic Narratives

One of the biggest challenges we encountered was how to authentically capture and represent the village’s narratives in our campaign. We arrived with cameras and notebooks, also with the awareness that as outsiders we needed to earn trust and truly understand the community’s story before attempting to tell it. There was a real risk of imposing our own ideas or simplifying the village’s rich culture into a one-dimensional marketing tale. In our first days, we consciously decided to hold back our preconceived plans and listen first. As one of my journal entries notes, *“Instead of rushing to impose, we’ve been focusing on co-creating - learning from the villagers*

first and then proposing ideas that might complement their efforts.” This mindset set the tone for our project: we wanted any branding or content we created to emanate from the villagers’ own voices rather than simply projecting what we thought would look good.

Authentically capturing the village narrative also meant overcoming practical obstacles. A very tangible challenge was the limited connectivity and technology infrastructure in the village. The internet connection was so poor that even sending a text message was difficult. Initially, I worried that this would hinder our ability to research online marketing trends or upload content. However, this hurdle turned into an unexpected blessing in disguise - it forced us offline and into the fields and homes of the community. With smartphones set aside, we used our senses and empathy to absorb the rhythm of village life. In my blogs, I recorded how being pushed away from cell phones and the Internet led me to slow down, hike the mountains, learn about local plants and animals, truly observing my environment. This deep immersion helped us capture details and stories we never would have noticed from behind a screen. We realized that to represent the community honestly, we had to experience it personally, something AI or web search could never substitute.

Another challenge was balancing the desire to make a positive impact on the community with the need to remain respectful and true to their context. We knew the village had concrete needs: local farmers and the fledgling media team were struggling with limited brand recognition and underdeveloped marketing materials for their products. For instance, when the local live-streaming team was trying to sell produce online, they only had hand-written A4 paper signs. We hoped to help farmers gain better income and pride from a stronger brand. However, the challenge lay in doing this without altering the soul of the community’s story. We constantly asked ourselves: *How can we showcase the village’s offerings to a broader audience in a way that benefits the community and not just our resume? How do we ensure the villagers see themselves in the final campaign and feel proud?* Keeping these questions in mind helped us navigate the fine line between creative marketing and authentic representation.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed: Communication, Humility & Creative Collaboration

Throughout the project, I had countless opportunities to apply and hone key leadership skills – especially communication, cultural humility, and creative collaboration. One early leadership moment came during our first team meeting. We were a small group of students from diverse backgrounds, and I took initiative to lead open communication by suggesting that we go beyond just introducing our names and roles. We each shared our personal “why” – why we came here and why this project mattered to us. In those quiet conversations under the wooden beams of a village meeting hall, I realised how powerful it is to be surrounded by young people who believe in bridging tradition with technology.

As the weeks progressed, I also stepped up in more formal ways to guide and communicate knowledge within our team. Being an Economics and Management student, I had learned about marketing frameworks in the classroom. Sensing an opportunity to apply this in a practical setting, I volunteered to lead a branding seminar for my peers one afternoon. Drawing from Aaker's Brand Equity Model, I explained core concepts of building strong brands – such as brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. To keep it engaging, I turned it into a dialogue: after presenting each idea, I invited my teammates to share their favorite brands and reflect on why those brands resonated with them. The response was heartening. *“I was genuinely touched by how engaged everyone was, and the positive feedback made me feel delighted and encouraged,”* I wrote afterward.

Another critical set of skills I developed involved creative collaboration - working together with my team and the villagers to craft a campaign that was innovative yet grounded in local reality. After spending time learning and listening in the first two weeks, we plunged into group brainstorming sessions to turn ideas into action. *“With enough background experiences and knowledge shared, we began our first group brainstorming to develop new marketing strategies,”* I noted in Week 2. We decided to start with what felt most accessible: creating posters and short videos that would be visually compelling and emotionally resonant. Our vision was clear and collective: *to craft materials that reflect not only the products, but also the people and the place behind them.* We want to capture the stories behind each harvest, and the beauty of rural life. In practice, this meant that every creative decision was run through a filter of empathy: does this design or slogan respect the people it represents? Does it invite the audience into the villagers' world in a genuine way? For example, when designing a poster for the local rice, we moved away from generic slogans. Instead of a bland phrase like “quality organic rice,” we chose imagery and text that evoked family memories of rice porridge and the tradition of making rice cakes for festivals, ideas that emerged from conversations with villagers. This way, the promotion didn't feel like selling a product, but inviting people into a way of life.

A specific anecdote that highlights our empathetic and collaborative approach was the creation of the branding posters. In Week 3, after interviewing the local live-streaming team and several farmers, we sketched out initial poster ideas. We discovered the local team struggled to convey just how organic and authentic their products were – they had no visuals to prove it. Taking this to heart, we focused our first poster drafts on “designing with meaning and stories” rather than generic ‘buy now’ appeals. One poster, for instance, featured a collage of real photos: an old farmer in his field with his cattle (demonstrating the organic fertilizing method), a close-up of heirloom rice grains, and a village grandmother happily stirring a pot of porridge. We made sure each image and caption came from a story we'd been told, not a stock idea. Creating these posters was a team effort that required mutual respect and iterative feedback. We sat around a table, sketching and arranging elements, while recalling what we had heard and seen in the past weeks. I remember one of my teammates, who had a talent for art, patiently redrawing a farmer's figure until we felt it looked just right – not romanticized, just real. Through rounds of discussion, we refined the designs to balance aesthetics with authenticity. By Week 5, when we finally confirmed our final poster designs and sent them to print, it truly

felt like a shared achievement . Everyone had contributed – from content ideas, to visuals, to phrasing – and importantly, the villagers’ input was embedded in the outcome.

Cultural Humility: Learning and Respecting Local Traditions

Perhaps the most profound leadership lesson I learned was cultural humility – the importance of recognizing and respecting traditions, values, and storytelling forms different from my own. Our village hosts and partners were not just sources of information; they became our teachers. Very early on, we understood that to work effectively here, we had to approach every interaction with empathy, curiosity, and an open mind.

One vivid example of cultural humility in action was when we learned about the village’s farming practices. During Week 3, we interviewed a group of farmers about their connection to the land . They told us a story that really stayed with me: unlike many modern farms, these villagers still plough their rice fields with cattle instead of machines. As an outsider – and a city person at that – my initial reaction was surprise. Wasn’t using buffalo slow and outdated? Even some “experts” might argue this yields less crop than machine tilling. But as I listened to the farmers, my perspective shifted completely. They explained how this traditional method is a deeply intentional, sustainable practice: the cows fertilise the fields with their manure as they plod along, creating a natural ecological loop. “The process is slower,” one farmer admitted with a smile, “but good rice takes time to grow, just like good stories take time to tell”. That simple, profound statement encapsulated so much wisdom. It taught me to see tradition not as resistance to change, but as a form of wisdom and identity. Instead of viewing the village as a place “left behind” by modernity, I began to see it as a community moving forward in its own wise way and pace. This shift was only possible because we approached them as learners, not as saviors or experts. By practicing active listening and asking humble questions, I was able to appreciate a worldview where progress is measured in sustainability and quality, not just speed or quantity.

Cultural humility meant embracing local forms of expression and storytelling on their own terms. Guizhou’s rural culture is rich with folk songs, dialect proverbs, festivals, and communal activities that carry the community’s values. We realized that if we wanted to promote the farmers’ brand effectively, we needed to incorporate these cultural elements rather than ignore them. For instance, while scripting short promotional videos, our team decided to experiment with the familiar sounds and wisdom of the village – including sprinkling in the local dialect, quoting old sayings we learned from elders, and even using fragments of a folk song as background music . One video opens not with a flashy stock music track, but with the gentle hum of a traditional lullaby sung by a grandmother as she shells corn. By integrating these touches, we showed respect for the community’s voice. It was our way of saying: *this campaign is not just about selling products; it’s about celebrating who you are.*

Conclusion

In terms of personal leadership growth, this LiA experience has been nothing short of transformative. I have grown more confident as a communicator, able to bridge worlds – whether between academic theory and practical action, or between urban youth culture and rural traditions. I have honed my ability to listen actively and empathetically, a skill that I believe is at the core of any effective leadership. Importantly, I have internalized the value of cultural humility and ethical storytelling. Going forward, any project I lead that involves community narratives or sustainability will be approached with the mindset I developed in Guizhou: *co-create with the community, respect their knowledge and voice, and use my skills to enhance (not overshadow) their story*. I now truly appreciate that issues like economic inequality, technological access, and cultural preservation are deeply interconnected – addressing them requires a blend of innovation and empathy. This insight has strengthened my sense of responsibility as a global citizen. I feel a greater commitment to the SDGs we touched upon, whether it's fighting for sustainable agriculture and zero hunger (SDG 2) or nurturing sustainable communities (SDG 11) through culturally conscious development. These goals no longer feel like abstract UN terms; I have seen their meaning in the faces and fields of Yangdong Village.

My LiA project in Guizhou taught me that leadership is as about the heart and the mind. It's about caring for people's stories, building bridges between different worlds, and standing back to let others shine. I have grown into a more reflective, compassionate leader who values collaboration over individual glory. As I packed my bags on the final day, I felt the mountains, fields, and voices of Yangdong Village will forever whisper to me, reminding me to pause and listen. And in those whispers lies the guidance for my future leadership path - one that will weave together storytelling, sustainability, and cross-cultural engagement to create impact with humanity at its core.