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Himalayan heart

For head of China's only registered NGO in Nepal, poverty alleviation and people-to-people diplomacy are paramount

By **YANG HAN** in Hong Kong
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Having given up her job as a government official years ago, Zou Zhiqiang is content spending time in poor areas of China and extends that same care to people in Nepal.

"Nepal has now become my second home," said Zou, who serves as country director at the Nepal office of the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA). This has been her fourth year living in the South Asian nation that shares a 1,414-kilometer border with China along the Himalayas.

Zou was sent to Nepal by CFPA for emergency aid following the 7.8-magnitude earthquake on April 25, 2015. Since then, she has spent around 300 days in Nepal each year, helping establish the branch office from scratch and overseeing its operation as the only Chinese employee there.

The 2015 earthquake was the worst disaster in Nepal's history in terms of human casualties, taking 9,000 lives and affecting close to 10 million people. Early estimates suggested that the quake and aftershocks pushed an additional 3 percent of the population into poverty, according to the World Bank.

"I was sent in the second batch of emergency teams, helping with rescue and distribution of food and clean water," said Zou. She had already taken part in humanitarian work in response to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and 2014 Ludian earthquake, in Southwest China's Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, respectively.

As one of China's largest nongovernmental organizations in poverty reduction, CFPA raised more than 10 million yuan (\$1.44 million) for emergency rescue and post-disaster reconstruction in Nepal. During the emergency relief phase, 138 people from CFPA invested over 5,000 hours in continuous emergency rescue for 60 days, carrying out 15 projects including disinfection treatment, disaster investigation and life rescue. Later, it launched projects in education and healthcare in the post-disaster phase, during which 48 temporary schools were built.

"At first, we didn't really think about having a country office here," said Zou. That changed when she and others at CFPA found it necessary to continue their Nepal projects with the remaining funds.

As many volunteers left after the emergency relief phase due to work commitments and other personal

reasons, Zou, who is also the assistant director of CFPA's international development department, stayed on. The Nepal office was officially registered on Aug 13, 2015, upon the signing of the General Agreement with Nepal's Welfare Council.

The agreement was significant because it made CFPA the first Chinese NGO to be registered in Nepal, and it was signed on the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Nepal.

As of April 2017, CFPA had raised a total of 11.43 million yuan in funds and materials for emergency relief and post-disaster recovery efforts, benefiting more than 193,800 people. Its projects ranged from healthcare and education to community upgrading — including the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Program (WASH), hepatitis B screening, school rebuild program, and the love-package and stationery program.

Zou said the four main directions of the Nepal office include being driven by local demand, promoting win-win cooperation with local partners, developing sustainable projects, and sharing experience. Except for her, all employees in the Nepal office are local recruits.

Each month, Zou needs to visit two to three villages for CFPA's projects. She will travel for four hours on bumpy roads to get from Pokhara to Ghandruk, just to make sure the hepatitis B screening project is going well, to prevent the tourism village from being affected. Even during rainy season, she will travel through storms to deliver new backpacks and stationery to students in need.

"I feel kind of uncomfortable if I don't get on this kind of road in a while — I always look forward to the next village trip, no matter near or far," she said.

The daughter of two university professors, Zou could have chosen a very different career path. She passed the test to become an official at the Information Center of the State Administration of Press and Publication (SAPP) in 1998, after acquiring her postgraduate degree from Soochow University, in Suzhou, East China's Jiangsu province.

"There were not many postgraduate students at that time ... so after I graduated, I was quite ambitious about what I would do. I felt I needed to make the most of everything I have learned and contribute to society," said Zou, who was assigned to edit a monthly newspaper that



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published stories by reporters and editors across the nation.

"My daily job was just reading newspapers or getting stories from the editor-in-chief," said Zou. "I felt that it was not the kind of job I wanted."

She first got in touch with CFPA in 2001, when it was organizing an event to bring more than 100 reporters to visit poor villages in China. To raise more media attention, the NGO turned to Zou's department, asking for help in recruiting journalists. Out of curiosity, Zou followed the media group and first saw how poverty alleviation was needed in some extremely poor regions.

Her personal interest in doing something more meaningful propelled her to eventually leave the SAPP and join CFPA in the development department. Her boss at the SAPP wanted her to come back, so talked her into retaining that post for a year but on a suspended salary.

The CFPA role required her to make endless phone calls, ride a bike and travel across Beijing, asking for donations. "Even now I am still constantly asking people for money," said Zou, who does not find it embarrassing as the money improves the lives of thousands of poor people.

Questions directed at Zou about her job are sometimes in the form of: "What is the point of going to Nepal when we still have so many people living below the poverty line in China?"

But she explained: "The execution of international projects plays an important role in people-to-people diplomacy."

She cited the hepatitis B screening project as an example. Besides treating 50,000 people in Nepal, the whole project trained 109 doctors and clinic staff. In addition, a sample survey of 1,000 cases was submitted

to the Nepal government for future reference.

Those doctors and clinic staff have become community leaders and are hailed as 'heroes' for spreading healthcare messages, said Zou.

She said that the local people's changed attitudes — from initially being reluctant to eventually cooperating with the Chinese NGO — shows how hearts can be linked and trust built.

Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries, and Zou said that although the organization wants to help the roughly 33 percent of the country's population who are yet to cross the poverty threshold, location issues and cost concerns like poor infrastructure and four months of rainy season force the organization to carefully consider each project.

"Though we are the biggest foundation (in poverty reduction) in China, it is still a big challenge for us to afford an overseas office," said Zou. "All donations received are used for poverty alleviation projects only, since no donor will allow us to use the money for office operations or other expenses."

Since most of CFPA's money is raised from donations from private companies, Zou said it is important to maintain high transparency in project execution.

"I hope more Chinese NGOs can go out, so that it will be a group of people (working in a synergized way) to help with the poverty alleviation in Nepal," said Zou, who wants to see more projects boosting microfinance, female empowerment, and skills training.

"Now we engage Chinese enterprises in Nepal in our projects and have built a volunteer group to allow Chinese people in Nepal to stay active in poverty alleviation, which can also (facilitate) companies' corporate social responsibility," said Zou.

Bio

Zou Zhiqiang

China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) international development department assistant director, and country director of Nepal office

Education:

2014: Achieved certification in international management skills training, United States

1998: Master of Arts, Soochow University, China

Career milestones:

2015-present: Country director of Nepal office, CFPA

2013-present: Assistant director, international development department, CFPA

2006-13: Deputy director, China Aviation Publishing & Media Co

2002-06: Assistant director, department of maternal and infant health, CFPA

1998-2001: Official, Information Center of State Administration of Press and Publication

Quick takes:

Do you miss home when you are in Nepal?

At first I missed home a lot because I had never left home for more than one month in the past. But as the first country director for a Chinese NGO I felt I had the mission to take on my responsibility. We have this banner hanging in our Nepal office that says: Persist, let CFPA Nepal office exist. We needed to share China's experience with Nepal to help them recover from the earthquake.

There was a time when you left CFPA for a number of years, why?

I just felt I needed to go to an actual public relations company, in order to learn how they operate and get to know more companies (to increase my chances of raising more money). I told my boss (at CFPA) that I needed to go out to see a bigger world and that my only request was to come back afterwards. In 2013, the 7.0-magnitude Ya'an earthquake (in Southwest China's Sichuan province) occurred and I decided to go back (to help with post-disaster reconstruction).

What do you like most about Nepal?

I like the Chitwan district best, probably because I like water and being close to the lowland area. If you visit there in October, you will hear all kinds of birds singing around you when you are having breakfast under the clear blue sky. I have been to over 20 villages in Pokhara, but I still feel kind of scared when walking on winding mountain roads and cliffs.