



When accounting “isn’t just about the numbers”

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Donating your time and accounting skill can be hugely valuable to a charity, and your own wellbeing.

Earlier this year Mark Clayton FMAAT won an AAT Award for his inspiring work (<https://www.aatcomment.org.uk/audience/members/the-aat-award-winners-making-a-real-world-difference/>) with charities in China. Here, he explains more about the role accounting technicians can play in giving something back.

Ronnie ‘Chopper’ Keelan was a popular member of the expat community in Zhuhai – the Chinese city I had made my home. By day, he’d teach English at the local flight attendant training school; by night, he’d play guitar in local bars. He was looking forward to becoming a father. Sadly, when his wife was seven months pregnant, Ronnie passed away of a heart attack in his bed. Helping carry his body out of his apartment and down the stairwell was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.

Ronnie’s wife was distraught. On top of their grief, his wife and daughter were also facing an uncertain financial future – unfortunately, Ronnie’s employers had only given him a basic life insurance package. Sitting around with my friends in the weeks afterwards, trying to process Ronnie’s death, it was clear we had to do something. Somebody had the idea of doing a music festival.

Paying it back

‘Chopper Wood’ (so-called after Ronnie’s nickname) was held in September 2011 and featured a raft of local musicians and bands. It was a resounding success, raising \$20,000 (£16,000) for his wife and daughter.

It taught me that everybody can give something back and make a difference. That’s why some friends and I decided to launch the Come Together Community (CTC), a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Through CTC, we’ve since hosted annual music festivals that have raised money for local underprivileged children such as orphans or those with health problems. I remember one girl who had seven brain surgeries; we were able to help her family with living expenses from the festival’s proceeds.

“All this philanthropic work has definitely made me happier. The more you help others, the more you start to see goodness everywhere.”

In 2014 I was introduced to the Zhuhai Autism Society (ZAS), set up by parents of autistic children in the region. At the time, China didn’t recognise autism. The concept of ‘face’ (the dignity or prestige somebody has in their social relationships) is big in many Asian cultures. Many families don’t want their peers to learn their child might have autism be-

cause they don't want to lose this 'face'. Some would refuse to acknowledge their children were living with autism and would put them in public school, rather than getting the specialised help they need. It's sad to see – but things are improving.

(<https://www.aatcomment.org.uk>)



We worked with the ZAS to fund a day-care centre – a safe space for the children while their parents were at work. One of my proudest moments came in 2021 when this day-care centre shut its doors. I know that sounds strange, but the reason it closed is that the local government finally recognised they needed to help children with autism and their families (partly thanks to us raising awareness) and decided to extend the hours of the local special needs school.

CTC has helped organise projects for the children such as arts and crafts and baking programmes. One of our most exciting projects is our robot programme, which sees teachers training children with autism how to build and control robots.

We've also partnered with Flex, one of the world's largest electronic manufacturing companies (they make Xboxes among other things) to teach transferable skills to children with autism, which they can use to get jobs, generate an income and be self-sufficient. Flex has enabled many children from the ZAS to get jobs working on its assembly line, opportunities that otherwise might not have been open to them.

Since founding CTC in 2011, I'm proud to say we've raised more than \$385,000 (£310,000) for great local causes. I'm currently chairman and council member, a wide-ranging role that sees me look after charity accounts and audit, head marketing, plus provide the corporate governance and risk oversight for the NGO.

Accounting for charities

These charitable activities are undertaken alongside my role as group chief financial officer at China 2 West (C2W). Just like my day job, my AAT studies have come into good use in the charity world. If you have accounting skills and want to do something purpose-driven, there are so many opportunities where you can employ this knowledge.

For example, if we're hosting a programme teaching children with autism how to rollerskate, we'd need to break down the costs of venue hire, the teacher's salary per hour, the social worker's salary, the cost of the rollerblades and so on. I firmly believe that if you're planning to work in charity, AAT is the best thing to study.

It isn't just about the numbers: the ethical knowledge you acquire when training as an accounting technician is also a massive help. Transparency is essential in charity. Sadly, there are many bad eggs out there, but if you're transparent and have the ethics to underpin that, you can do some brilliant things helping others.

Pride in ethics

This was something I discovered when I wanted to register CTC as an official NGO in China in 2013. Thanks to my ethics training at AAT, I really pushed this as I knew few people would trust us with their money unless we became an official organisation. We needed to let people know that we are a 100% ethical charity and every single renminbi we raise is used to help children. H

Our work has also been acknowledged overseas, and I'm beyond flattered to have won the AAT Impact Award earlier this year, as well as seeing CTC pick up a prestigious United Nations Social Impact Award in 2019.

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On 27 May, CTC hosted its first music festival since Covid-19 struck. I wanted to make it the biggest festival we've ever hosted and raise more money than ever. I also hope we've made Ronnie proud.

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