

ZIRUI HUANG, FROM DESIGN AND ECONOMICS TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Zirui Huang (MPP 2019) is the founder of a social enterprise offering sustainable hand-knitting and weaving opportunities to disadvantaged women in Guizhou Province, China. She came to the Blavatnik School seeking to gain a policy perspective on improving environmental sustainability in the textile industry.

Zirui holds bachelor's degrees in economics and management (Purdue University) and design (Fashion Institute of Technology, New York). During her design degree, she carried out field research in Guizhou, a rural mountainous province and one of China's least economically developed regions. This research gave her an insight into some of the challenges faced by the women living in Guizhou's isolated villages. "Many of these women's husbands go to large cities to find work, so they are left behind with few opportunities," says Zirui. "In another province they might turn to farm work, but the mountainous geography of Guizhou means this is not possible there."

It was during the final year of her studies in New York that Zirui began the groundwork for her social enterprise, Zirui Studio. "I had to work hard at first to gain the women's trust," she says. "I then spent a lot of time training them in various techniques, such as hand-knitting and weaving, and the use of sustainable dyes." Despite moments of doubt, Zirui was driven to continue by seeing the impact of her work. She created a collection from the women's work and reached out to various organisations and media outlets to raise awareness of the project. The collection featured in *British Vogue*, among other publications, and was presented at the China Institute and the 10th Annual Sustainable Business and Design Conference, both in New York.

After graduating, Zirui worked as a communications and sourcing manager at a textile company selling sustainable collections, where she was in the preliminary stages of conversations with designers and manufacturers to have them produce more ethically and self-regulate waste disposal. She forged industry connections which proved valuable in her ongoing work at Zirui Studio, allowing her to connect the women in Guizhou Province with the relevant channels to ensure they could continue their work. Zirui soon began looking for a way to effect wider change in an industry that has little regulation around unsustainable practices, and this led her to the decision to study the Master of Public Policy ([/study/mpp](#)) (MPP) at the School.

"I want to use my skills and experience to bridge the gap between environmental policymakers and textile industry stakeholders to achieve collaborative, sustainable policy outcomes."

Although Zirui was initially hesitant about applying for the MPP due to her lack of direct experience in public policy, her dedication to public service earned her a place at the School.

"I'm passionate about my work and felt encouraged to apply by seeing the diversity of experience ([/study/mpp/student-experiences](#)) among the School's previous students."

She was awarded a Kwok Scholarship ([/study/mpp/mpp-fees-and-funding](#)) in recognition of the leadership and social responsibility displayed through her work in Guizhou.

Zirui was drawn to the MPP because of its multidisciplinary approach ([/study/mpp/mpp-detail](#)) and the faculty expertise ([/research/faculty-spotlights](#)). "I don't have an academic background in policy issues, so the course is helping me build a solid foundation in public policy, learning from faculty with extensive experience in their respective fields." The MPP's focus on practical policymaking has also proven valuable.

“Regular case studies (/case-centre-public-leadership) give you a detailed insight into policymaking in multiple contexts and demonstrate the complexity of real-life policy challenges.”

One policy area that Zirui has particularly enjoyed is sustainable finance. “A lot of companies are integrating ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] principles into their strategies to measure sustainability and the social impact of an organisation. I’m interested in examining the links between public policy and sustainable finance to encourage companies to think more about their wider impact.” She intends to use the summer project as an opportunity to explore this further.

A particular highlight of Zirui’s time at the Blavatnik School has been the opportunity to connect with fellow classmates who share her dedication for fostering women’s empowerment.

“I am inspired every day here by the people around me – by their ideas and their drive to create a better world.”

Zirui has enjoyed being immersed in the Oxford experience and making the most of college life. “I’ve found Oxford to be an open and welcoming place to live and study and feel supported by both the School and my college to pursue my goals.”

After graduation, Zirui intends to return to China and continue her work at Zirui Studio, expanding the business’s remit into other villages. She looks forward to implementing the practices and ideas she has gained during her time in Oxford to help build a more sustainable textile industry and bring much-needed opportunities to disadvantaged rural women in China.

Zirui is a Kwok Scholar.

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