

Chinese youth and alternative narratives of volunteering

Anthony J. Spires

The University of Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, volunteering has developed as a new field for governmental control and regulation of an emergent civil society. This article draws on interviews with 60 young volunteers in southern China, mostly university students and recent graduates. I contrast their experiences in off-campus, youth-led voluntary associations with the officially approved student organizations of normal university life. I argue that the instrumental organization of volunteers characterizes the party-state's efforts to funnel youthful enthusiasm and compassion into particular political projects and officially prescribed goals. Unhappy with the 'formalistic' nature of these activities, youth engaging in bottom-up volunteer initiatives articulate other priorities, including a strong desire for meaningful, personal engagement that state-led programmes and university student organizations are typically unable to provide.

Keywords

volunteering, civil society, youth, non-governmental organizations, formalism

During the 'two meetings' held in Beijing in March 2014, eye-level bulletin boards advertised the virtues of volunteering to visitors shopping at the Wangfujing pedestrian mall. Photographs of high-school students, Beijing police officers, middle-aged women, and university students depicted acts of service such as cutting hair and feeding sweet tapioca balls to elderly shut-ins and administering health exams in elementary schools. Captions like 'Caring for Others' served as both exhortations to ideal behaviour and explanations of the photos on display. A banner strung across pedestrian bridges over main thoroughfares in the city's wealthy Sanlitun district encouraged gridlocked drivers to 'Learn from Lei Feng, Contribute to Others, and Improve Yourself'. A perhaps

Corresponding author:

Anthony J. Spires, Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies/Asia Institute, Level 3, 761 Swanston Street, Sidney Myer Asia Centre, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia.

Email: anthony.spires@unimelb.edu.au

mythical communist soldier, Lei Feng has been held up for generations of contemporary Chinese as the ultimate exemplar of selfless giving. Although the stories of Lei's volunteering are perhaps not as motivational (or as convincing) as they once were, another photo at Wangfujing spotlighted a proud, plaque-holding 'Contemporary Lei Feng', an elderly gentleman who devotes himself regularly to helping people in need.

Surrounded by such images, tourists might be forgiven for assuming that China's capital is full of selfless and celebrated volunteers. Indeed, in accordance with national priorities, the Beijing branch of the Communist Youth League made 'making volunteer service go into everyday life' and establishing 300 model volunteer stations amongst the key goals of its 2013 work plan and 'promoting volunteer service' as a key goal in its 2015 work plan.¹ But nationally, as well, inducements to volunteer abound, as in the Shanghai Volunteer Regulations of 2009, which state that when hiring decisions are being made, government units should give preference to people with good volunteer records.² Even in far-flung and politically sensitive Tibet, regulations announced in January 2015 mandated that, when all else is equal, applicants with volunteer experience should get first priority at government jobs and places in schools.³

Such propaganda and preferential policies for volunteers are not simply rhetoric, however. One need only consider the incredible numbers of volunteers⁴ called upon to ensure the smooth running of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 to understand the power of the state to set goals and frame volunteerism for political purposes, be that patriotism or to show the 'warmth' of the Chinese people to foreign visitors. Yet such activities – organized and approved by organs of the party-state – are often perceived as a form of semi-compulsory volunteering that generates not warm fuzzy feelings but rather a sense of detachment and even potentially resentment. As Bin Xu describes it:

The Olympics were an orchestrated event. Orchestrated events need public participation, but their major purpose is to demonstrate the state's might, the nation's image and the Party's stability in leadership transition, rather than to solve a crisis. They reproduce and reinforce state corporatism in the existing political structure. Designed and rehearsed by the state to demonstrate an image of a rising China, the Olympics needed numerous volunteers, but they were strictly selected and trained by the Youth League and other GONGOs and worked in a militaristic way.⁵

University students, in particular, are a key target of state-led volunteering programmes.⁶ In this article, I argue that while the Chinese government seeks to direct the development of organized volunteerism with clearly utilitarian and political purposes in mind, volunteers in bottom-up, youth-led civil society groups have begun to articulate an aversion to the instrumentalist culture that typifies state-led programmes. I focus primarily on the ideals that young volunteers bring to their organizational experiences. By comparing their participation in officially approved university student organizations with the off-campus groups they themselves lead, I suggest that state instrumentalism overlooks and neglects youth volunteers' desire for meaningful social engagement. While initial motivations for volunteering vary, it is clear that these volunteers are seeking ways to connect emotionally with others, to build relationships and engage in activities that provide a sense of common purpose and belonging, and to contribute to something beyond simply

their own individual benefit. Their experiences suggest that government-directed volunteering is not up to the task of building the sorts of social capital and social trust that inhere in self-directed volunteering. In turn, this ultimately limits the broader social benefits that volunteering has the potential to produce.

Voluntary associations in civil society

In extant studies of civil society in China, the majority of scholarly attention has focused on professionalized non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and GONGOs (government-organized NGOs) that feature mostly paid staff engaged in advocacy or service delivery. A great deal of this interest in Chinese civil society is premised on the idea that extra-party associations may help usher in a new era of democracy in China. Inspired by the revolutions in Eastern and Central Europe and the role civil society groups played there, scholars have sought to discover what political role a nascent civil society might play in a rapidly changing China. Beginning in the 1990s, an initial focus on GONGOs has given way in recent years to research on relatively independent NGOs, with an eye to understanding these groups' relationship with the Chinese state.⁷ The generally shared motivation behind this wave of research on NGOs is quite straightforward: new groups of people coming together around common interests may be able to influence government officials and government policy in a realm relevant to their concerns. Given the long-dominant role of the Chinese state in so many areas of Chinese life, this focus on state–society relations is well warranted.

Based on extant social theory and studies of other social contexts, however, it is clear that civil society's significance is not limited to how professionalized interest groups advocate for their interests or how social service delivery NGOs interact with the state. Scholars of other societies, following in the tradition of Alexis de Tocqueville, argue that bottom–up voluntary associations are among the fundamental building blocks of democracy, in part because they can help build the kinds of deep interpersonal relations essential for societal trust and also teach the skills and habits necessary for democratic cooperation.⁸

Despite the popularity and power of Tocquevillean insights, recent ethnographic research on contemporary volunteering in the United States challenges us to look more closely at the subjective experiences of volunteers. In particular, Nina Eliasoph's studies of youth 'empowerment projects' in the contemporary United States point up a contrast between officially prescribed goals for such projects and the actual experience of volunteers and the youths whom such projects aim to empower.⁹ Rhetorically, such projects typically aimed at building bridges between people of different races, wealth, and backgrounds while 'empowering' less fortunate youth to learn to express themselves and to master the skills necessary for participating in American democracy. Yet Eliasoph found that these programmes were not productive of critical-thinking, active citizens of a democracy. The programmes were hobbled in part by short time frames for actual programme implementation and the expectations of donors who prized 'innovation' rather than continuity. In general, she found that the causes of the problems they sought to address went unexamined (p. 12):

There was not enough time for reflective discussions, anyway. So, the youth programs all just conducted projects with which no humane person could disagree – gathering mittens and cans of tuna for the poor, but not asking why there is hunger, for example – thus severing any connections between civic volunteering and political engagement, and tending to breed, paradoxically, hopelessness about finding any solutions beyond one mitten at a time.

For young ‘at risk’ youth who were the *targets* of after-school tutoring projects, the experience of being volunteered *upon* did little to nurture either broad social trust or strong personal trust between members (p. 233):

Rather than learning to trust the stream of plug-in adult volunteers who promise to become like beloved aunts but then vanish after a few months, youth participants often learn how to distinguish the real promises that organizers like Emily [a paid staff member] offer from the volunteers’ usually false promises. This is a useful lesson in cultivating not too much, and not too little, but the right amount of trust in a world whose organizations often promise the sun, the moon, and the stars.

While voluntary associations can in theory lead participants to better understand their own preferences and thereby contribute to moulding a democratic citizenry, Eliasoph argues that superficiality of engagement in such programmes works to deter political reflection. Moreover, such programmes tended, in practice, to suppress controversy and disagreement while producing blandly uncontroversial outputs that donors and local community leaders would appreciate (p. 233):

Rather than learning how to care about ‘the bigger picture,’ as some organizers hope they will, youth volunteers learn to ignore politics. Instead of learning how to connect their volunteer work with larger political debates, they learn technical skills of taking notes and running meetings. Learning civic skills minus politics is likely in organizations like these, which have to accept everyone regardless of viewpoint, and have to show results of action that all audiences will consider indisputably good.

Eliasoph is clear about the de-politicizing results of such projects and programmes. In this context, volunteering becomes a simple activity that, at best, perhaps provides feel-good moments of doing something for charity or the less fortunate, but that has little to no implications for political engagement or deepening social ties.

What I suggest in this article is that some Chinese youth experience government-directed volunteering in a similar fashion to the emptiness of American ‘empowerment projects’. Yet, while Eliasoph’s research paints a rather bleak image of youth-involved volunteering, the groups these Chinese youth have formed and are operating on their own are experienced as much more positive and meaningful social engagements. To show how this works, this article unfolds by first discussing the emergence and rapid growth of government-directed volunteering in China since the student-led protests of 1989. Next I introduce the data relied upon for the arguments developed here. Following this, I draw on in-depth interviews to provide accounts of the ritualized or ‘formalistic’ (形式化) volunteering common to many organizations with government backgrounds. I contrast these to young volunteers’ experiences in the bottom-up, voluntary associations

in which they find meaning as active participants. The article concludes by considering the implications of these contrasts for the future development of Chinese civil society and suggesting that the positive social and political benefits of volunteering are most likely to be achieved only within bottom-up voluntary associations.

Government-directed volunteering in China

In China, the overarching concern with state-society relations engendered by the initial rise of GONGOs has eclipsed Tocquevillean insights into voluntary associations. Even studies of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake response that note the outpouring of support from volunteers have mostly taken NGOs and their professionalized staff as the key locus of investigation and been mostly concerned with the relationship between these groups and the state.¹⁰ Although my main interest here lies in the subjective experiences of volunteers, in this section I provide context for their contestation of government-directed volunteering by highlighting the state's aims for encouraging and facilitating volunteering in the post-Mao era.

As Outi Luova explains, in the wake of the 1989 protests, the Ministry of Civil Affairs fixed upon volunteering as a way to help ameliorate social tensions and address new social needs brought about by economic reform and restructuring. A portrait of the official approval granted to volunteering can be cobbled together from a variety of sources, including speeches by national-level figures, such as Vice-Minister of Civil Affairs Zhang Dejiang in 1989, the reinvigoration of 'Learn from Lei Feng' campaigns in 1990, and initiatives to establish 'community service' as a key function of the lowest levels of government. Further 'opinion' statements from the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the State Council in 2005 and 2006 ensured that volunteers and community volunteer associations would be seen as politically legitimate and desirable.¹¹

Up until the 2016 Charity Law, which includes some articles concerning volunteers, government policy on volunteering has developed along a parallel but separate trajectory to policy on NGOs.¹² In 2006, the Communist Youth League announced national-level regulations to manage the registration of all Chinese volunteers.¹³ The ground-level practice of volunteering, however, has been governed by a patchwork of local regulations, typically based on existing legal structures and political rhetoric emanating from central government bodies. The 2010 Guangdong Province Regulations on Volunteering, for example, require that eligible volunteer groups register under the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Regulations on Social Organizations and state that government departments and other entities are permitted to organize volunteer teams within their work units.¹⁴ The 2008 Zhejiang Province Regulations on Volunteering are similar, stressing also that the regulations aim to promote 'a voluntary spirit of giving, friendship, mutual aid, and progress ... [and] the construction of a harmonious society'.¹⁵ With strong signals of top-level approval and generally supportive lower-level policy responses, over the past two decades many cities around China have seen explosive growth in government-organized volunteer associations.

In addition to the Ministry of Civil Affairs and its lower-level offices, the second major agent of government-directed volunteering is the Communist Youth League. As Ying Xu documents, in recent years the Communist Youth League has worked tirelessly

to develop volunteerism amongst youth as one of its key purposes, thereby promoting its own institutional legitimacy and survival. In this, they have also been incredibly successful. As one official proclaimed in 2010, 'Youth volunteering is an extremely valuable working brand created by Communist Youth League in the last 20 years' endeavour ... The Communist Youth League should draw on the experience of the volunteering work to promote the comprehensive work of the Communist Youth League.'¹⁶ Indeed, in 2013, the Communist Youth League celebrated 20 years of organized volunteering, proclaiming that nationwide they had established volunteer associations in all provinces, including in almost 3000 cities and 2000 universities. Moreover, they boasted over 130,000 volunteer service sites and had registered more than 40 million volunteers. Collectively, in 2012 alone, Communist Youth League volunteers had reportedly performed more than 690 million hours of volunteer service.¹⁷

With almost 90 million members in 2014 ranging from 14 to 28 years of age, the Communist Youth League indeed has a broad and solid base from which to encourage volunteering.¹⁸ In dozens of interviews with university students conducted in 2012 and 2013, almost all of them were Communist Youth League members and believed that 'everyone' joined the organization in junior high school if not earlier. In keeping with its role and ambitions, at Chinese universities, the Communist Youth League takes a leading responsibility for regulating student associational life. As many of my informants explained and as Xu notes, for example, 'students normally should seek the Communist Youth League's approval if they want to establish organizations, or reserve classrooms or other venues to organize activities'.¹⁹

In December 2013, the Communist Youth League released its five-year Youth Volunteerism Development Plan extolling the league's previous achievements and looking forward to a bright future through 2018. Evinced clearly utilitarian goals, the plan proclaims that youth volunteerism:

has already become an important medium for mobilizing young people to participate in the construction of economic society and an important new brand for a new era of the Communist Youth League. The coming five years are a critical period for comprehensively constructing a comfortable society (小康社会) and realizing the dream of a great renaissance for the Chinese people.²⁰

In their totality, these series of speeches, regulations, and guidelines from the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Communist Youth League have served to legitimize, encourage, and regulate the development of government-directed volunteer associations both on and off-campus. The effects of the 2016 Charity Law are yet to be seen, but the law does include several articles regarding volunteers, including real-name registration, a particularly worrisome requirement for grass-roots groups working on sensitive social or political issues.²¹

Extant literature has contributed greatly to documenting these processes of institutionalization and explaining policy variation among different administrative levels. As Luova notes, in general, 'the party-state has utilized associations as multipurpose partners that act as mediators between the party-state and society, provide community services, and influence values, with the ultimate objective of maintaining social stability

and the legitimacy of the Communist Party'.²² In a similar vein, Gladys Pak Lei Chong's study of volunteering in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games presents a discourse analysis of the 'model citizen' ideal promoted by the Chinese state. Framing her analysis in terms of Foucault's concept of governmentality, Chong identified three emphases of volunteer participation promoted by the government: not losing face, hosting a great Olympics, and 'dream and glory'. Based primarily on an analysis of official volunteer training materials and, secondarily, on interviews with 21 volunteers, she argues that 'the Chinese state succeeded in arranging things in such ways that moulded, guided, and directed its citizens/volunteers to internalize the values and act towards its objectives'.²³ By contrast, my findings here, based primarily on interviews, indicate that government-directed volunteering has left young volunteers not only affectively unfulfilled but with an active aversion to official volunteering practices.

Indeed, as valuable and necessary as prior works' state-centred analyses are, a singular focus on state intentions for volunteering risks overlooking the subjective experience of actual volunteers and the implications for them and for Chinese society more broadly.²⁴ To be sure, a few scholars of China have begun such work. Friederike Fleischer's small-scale study of youth volunteering in Guangzhou focused on the subjective inspirations and motivations for volunteering, finding that television from Hong Kong was frequently cited as a source of inspiration while personal satisfaction and happiness were reasons for continued participation.²⁵ Similarly, Unn Målfrid Rolandsen's research on a party-affiliated Youth Volunteers Association in a city in Fujian looked at the motivations driving volunteer participation, concluding that 'what attracts youth to the volunteer movement is the opportunity to be part of a collective where they can contribute to society, while at the same time being recognised as individuals'.²⁶ In an exploration of rapidly changing social norms around helping behaviours, Yunxiang Yan has detailed the risks of acting as a 'Good Samaritan' in China, especially for young people.²⁷

My interest here lies less in volunteers' motivations and theories of individualism than in the sharply contrasting experiences they report when comparing their participation in government-directed volunteering projects with the bottom-up projects they organize outside of government structures. These distinctions, I argue, help us begin to understand the broader social significance of bottom-up civil society development and the limitations of top-down models. Before drawing these arguments out, however, I discuss the data and methodology used in recording their experiences.

Data and methodology

Every autumn, first-year university students all across China find themselves away from home and in a new community with many exciting possibilities. No longer weighed down by the academic demands and pressure of the university entrance exam, many are eager to explore the extracurricular clubs the typical university offers. Some organizations offer volunteer opportunities in the community or on campus. Others, like the student union, offer the chance to make a name for oneself through formal service to one's academic department, the larger multidiscipline faculty, or the entire university. Typically, these clubs are registered officially under the school's Communist Youth League and are assigned a teacher to oversee and supervise their activities.

Most of the young people in this study joined at least one officially registered club in their first year of university. Their express motivations were varied but ran the gamut from wanting to explore a new interest or hobby to wanting to hone practical skills. As described in interviews, a more utilitarian motivation for some students was the opportunity to accumulate ‘points’ that can help them qualify for scholarships. Some calculate that serving in official leadership positions – thereby garnering even more points – will bring opportunities to build personal relations with supervising professors, the school’s party leaders, and administrators, as well as improving their eventual job prospects.

While on-campus organizations form the backdrop for much of the analysis here, in this study I draw most heavily on interview data with two off-campus, youth-led NGOs, ‘Bridges’ and ‘Together’.²⁸ These two NGOs are distinctive in that their activities are almost entirely volunteer-organized and led. Both employ a barebones staff comprised of three to five former volunteers working for little or no pay. Their boards are comprised primarily of former volunteers, and both have experimented greatly with various staff roles, governance structures, and funding models since their founding (circa 2001, in both cases). I followed both groups closely from 2005 to 2015, joining some activities as a participant and engaging in many small-group conversations about their work and development. Over the course of the past 17 years, both groups have received some financial assistance from Chinese domestic companies and individuals, with some occasional funds from Hong Kong and foundations in one or two other countries. Although neither group has been able to employ a trained accountant consistently, overall expenses have mostly been covered personally by the volunteers themselves through odd jobs, on-campus charity bazaars, and other small-scale fundraising activities. And while both groups rely mostly on volunteers from universities in southern China, they maintain off-campus offices and are independent of any one university. Both legally registered their main offices as private, non-commercial enterprises (民办非企业单位) in 2013 after years of lobbying by supporters in academia, business, and even government.

In order to preserve confidentiality, I generally refrain from noting a particular speaker’s group affiliation when quoting interviewees. The comparison of interest here, to be clear, is between these groups and the typical official organizations that they have also experienced at university or, for older volunteers, in their early work lives. Other aspects of contrast emerged in interviews – notably hierarchy and notions of (in)equality – but, due to space concerns, here I focus primarily on the affective search for meaningful engagement.²⁹

This article draws primarily on in-depth interviews I conducted with 60 participants affiliated with one of these two groups. Both groups work in rural villages in southern China, one running educational programmes for disadvantaged children and the other a variety of programmes for mostly elderly villagers affected by leprosy. The average age of the interviewees was 24.8 years. Aside from a few of the founders and older volunteers, the vast majority of these interviewees were new to me and were introduced by the current staff or organizers of the groups at my request. The bulk of the interviews were conducted between early 2012 and mid-2013. Almost all of these took place in a private room in the NGOs’ offices and lasted just over 90 minutes on average. Most were recorded and later transcribed. Some interviewees were interviewed more than once. The interviews covered a broad range of topics about volunteering and organizational dynamics. The perspectives and experiences of these interviewees form the core of this article,

but they comprise only part of a larger and longer-term investigation of the organizational culture of Chinese NGOs. The analyses presented here are thus inevitably informed by this larger research project and by my participant-observation experiences in these and other Chinese NGOs since 2005.

The formalistic volunteering experience

As with the 2008 Beijing Olympics, during the Guangzhou-hosted 2010 Asian Games, the government's volunteer mobilization efforts focused prominently on university students. Several of my interviewees had 'been mobilized' during the lead-up to the games through official student organizations. Yet most frequently they described these as 'formalistic' and 'meaningless' exercises in following orders and meeting the demands of university authorities. One student who had taken part in several university activities described the emptiness of such gestures in almost literal terms:

During the Asian Games, the university said each class had to send a certain number of people over to the sporting venues. A lot of times, actually, they just sent people over there just to take the photo of them at the venue.... Sometimes there weren't many people at the sports [events] that ... aren't so common in China, so they'd use this kind of method [to make a good show for media]. I witnessed it myself, like a stadium with only half the seats full, the cameras focused only on the places where it looked full of people, where most people were sitting.... That's a kind of formalism. But, it's the government that wishes [for] ... that kind of thing.³⁰

The notion of 'formalism' (形式主义) is perhaps awkwardly translated into English. It has to date received little attention from scholars but has been common in recent Chinese discourse, even being used by government officials. In 2014, for example, after a speech by Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Qishan, the Party Secretary of Jilin Province, Wang Rulin, began offering a long-winded summarization of the higher-ranked Wang's remarks. An apparently frustrated Wang Qishan told him to shorten his remarks, sarcastically saying, 'You're definitely going to say how important my speech was.' Pointing to the written comments in Wang Rulin's hands, he went on to castigate him further, saying, 'I didn't read from a prepared speech just now. How could you have printed out so much in advance? Isn't this formalism? You don't need to read any more!'³¹

For the volunteers in this study, many understood formalism in terms of doing things for show, for politeness, and without real substance or meaning. As described by one:

For example, you come over to visit [my village], and I wait by the entrance to welcome you when you arrive. Then we set off firecrackers and shake hands and share some snacks. Just like the opening ceremony [of some event]. We'll call some people over and exchange some pleasantries, then probably ask someone to take a photograph to document [our meeting]. Then there are more pleasantries, then it's over. This is what we call formalistic.

Inducements to volunteering and formalism

As anywhere in the contemporary world, the motivations behind volunteering are often structured and shaped by the larger social and political environment. Volunteering helps strengthen the applications of American high school students seeking entry into top

universities, for example, where admissions committees are interested in identifying young leaders that may later bring fame and fortune to their institutions. In China, similar inducements are at work in the lives of young people, but they typically begin later, during university life. Many interviewees believed formalism resulted from convention but also emphasized the tangible incentives or inducements to join government-directed volunteering programmes. Even outside the university setting, such incentives were evident in activities organized by larger institutions like government agencies and even businesses. One social work graduate student recounted her experience with formalism and the inducements that often underpin it in this way:

I went with people one time to visit the elderly in a nursing home.... All the volunteers were from a company. They were organized by the local [government-organized] volunteer association and that company. They took gifts, like fruit and other things, to give to the old people and then took a picture as they were giving them the stuff.... I talked to some of the old people there and found that they didn't ask for any of these things. They said that people often come in large groups to give them things – often things they don't even need. And they don't talk with them or anything! They just hand them something and have their picture taken. But the old people said they didn't mind if people didn't want to talk to them, that it was OK anyway.

Later I asked the leader of the company group and learned that many of them were unhappy about having to go do this. I talked to some [of the employees], too, and they said it was like they were just going to fulfil some assignments sent down to them by those above. After it was all over, someone from the company's public relations office called everyone together so we could take a group picture and they could put in a press release the number of employees who participated in this volunteer activity helping old people ... Ha ha! They tried to get me in the picture, but I felt too weird about it, so I offered to take their pictures for them. The whole scene was very formalistic, like they were just there to fulfil an assignment.

As with the company employees visiting this nursing home, students who participated in government-directed volunteer activities were often drawn in by multiple incentives and pressure from the larger institutions that regulate their lives. My interviews with university students and recent graduates revealed that participation in university-organized volunteer programmes – like the 'Three Down to the Countryside' (三下乡) teaching programme and the student union – is often motivated by the need to gain points that will help when applying for scholarships and for other purposes. While the corporate employees described above perhaps only felt annoyed at the demands on them to fulfil 'assignments', many of my student interviewees saw these sorts of inducements as adulterations of the volunteer experience, even as some acknowledged their appeal to those who think most 'practically'. One student's understanding of the incentives to participate in officially organized activities was typical of the accounts given by many others:

At university, lots of clubs ... bring in terms like 'standing committee member', lots of things like that. I feel these are very high-ranking terms. They'll say, 'I'm a standing committee member', and get extra points for that. I think that's a kind of borrowing from society, the way they bring in things like that. And they get some benefit from it, so, for example, if they want to enter the CCP they'll get priority. They can rely on those club connections. Some people just

join for that stuff, because it will help them get closer to teachers or maybe get opportunities to meet people outside the university who can help them get jobs later on.

Another student who volunteered in youth-led organizations but also joined the university student union reinforced this view, drawing a sharp contrast between the organizational cultures of the two:

The student union is more utilitarian.... Well, of course I cannot exclude the possibility that you have pure motives, that you're working purely for the good of the organization or to improve your skills in some way, but [in the student union] it's more often about putting something on your resume.... You could even say it's a way to help get you a job.... And it's good for your relations with teachers. But our starting point is to do something charitable. I personally think of these as two totally separate things. I participate at the same time in both the student union and [our group]. If I had to choose, I would definitely put [our group] as my top priority.... In [our group] I'm much more relaxed, I don't do like in those other organizations, pursuing utilitarian goals.

For many students, participation in official organizations, even volunteer-based activities, left them feeling unsatisfied and affectively disconnected from other participants. Talk about the formalism of university-approved student clubs was used to draw a sharp contrast with Bridges/Together and underscored a desire for positive, meaningful interactions with others.

[What's the difference between the two other clubs you joined at university and [your group]? Because the Communications Club and the Loving Heart Society are both university-run groups – they're [officially registered] student organizations, you know ... I feel they're more formalistic.... And because they're university clubs, they don't do very much. Like the Loving Heart Society – it's only active for one semester a year, or they only go like once a month to an old folks' home, and only for one day. And when we go there, it's only to take some fruit to them, and then share one piece of fruit with one old person. The club asks you to give it to them [a gesture of respect]. And then you talk with them a little.... It feels like the only reason you're doing this stuff is for the sake of saying you're doing something charitable.

For such people, after playing active roles as joiners and leaders in Bridges and Together, volunteering 'for the sake of saying you're doing something charitable' ceased to have much appeal. These folks sometimes drew associations between charity (慈善) and formalism, contrasting them with the more meaningful, deeper interactions they had with others in Bridges/Together activities. The account given by one volunteer reflected a depth of feeling and sincerity that was evident in interviews with both groups:

[How do you think [your group] differs from the typical club?] Most important is that all of [our group's] activities are organized entirely by ourselves. Although some other [university-run] clubs also organize things by themselves, more of them use connections [guanxi] with the government in their activities or get some money from the government for their activities, some funding.... But [our group] can truly let you do something useful, it offers a truly practical, real-world experience of society. For example, some schools organize 'up to the mountains, down to the countryside' (上山下乡) activities, but in my understanding 60 to 80 per cent of them are

more formalistic ... like visiting a hospital and going to visit elderly people [in nursing homes]. You take a photo in the morning with the old folks, but you don't leave anything behind, and you haven't truly talked with them about anything meaningful. You can say that you haven't gone deeply into their hearts to talk about what they want to talk about. It's all very polite, with everyone saying 'thank you' – very formalistic. But in [our group] we totally just take the elderly and students as people, allowing us to really engage with each other, and also between the elderly themselves, like a real family.

As with formalism, this kind of talk about 'meaningfulness' was another recurring theme used to contrast official groups and Bridges/Together. In the above account, meaningfulness was used to describe the kinds of affective ties that, in sociological terms, often underpin social trust. Yet in other situations, meaningfulness could also refer to the practical or actual production of benefits or goods that many sociologists expect to come from collective activity. Volunteers spoke with disdain or disappointment about activities that were only designed to win points or fulfil the expectations of authorities rather than meet a social need or provide a useful service. One woman who had joined the student union in her university described the lack of meaningfulness in such terms, even as she was resigned to doing her duty as a part of the organization:

When [the student union] held activities, in general there wasn't much consideration of the activity's true meaningfulness.... For example, each department [within the student union] is required to do a certain number of volunteer activities. Once you've fulfilled your quota, you can go get a prize. There's a prize, yeah. So people go and do those really meaningless activities. Like if they went for a bicycle ride, the department head [a student leader] would say, 'We can treat this as a volunteer activity and report it up.' So it would become a volunteer activity, one that promotes environmental protection.... Sometimes it was just a very superficial thing, you know, in terms of its meaningfulness.... I came to feel that the student union places a lot of importance on those sorts of prizes. I actually didn't know it was that way until after I joined.... But I felt like that stuff had nothing to do with me. I just tried to do my best in my role.

In the eyes of most interviewees, typical university clubs and university student union activities – like engaging in bike rides that could be labelled volunteer activities – were seen as heavily influenced by the norms of broader society, and particularly as 'government style' volunteering. Tom Gold, writing about the cohort of people born in the 1950s, notes that for them, 'Chinese communists did not define youth as a time for the individual's autonomous quest for self-identity and meaning as in the west; youth's challenge was to submit to and accept the official definition of these things in the fashion of the selfless, unquestioning soldier Lei Feng.'³² In contrast, today's youth are clearly pushing back against the government definitions of volunteering that have persisted into the 21st century. Indeed, what I term 'government-led' or 'government-directed' volunteering emerges from interviewees' narratives about their experiences with formalism and their view that it emanates 'from society' or government. One young person put it in exactly such terms, emphasizing both the utilitarian nature of the activity and the authority relations embedded in its production:

For example, ... in [our province] we have a science centre. [As members of an official student organization] we also recruited volunteers for them. Those were all government-style

volunteers. They all gave stipends and provided meals, etc.... In the beginning, it was RMB 10, but now it has become RMB 15 per day, plus a free lunch at noontime. That style of volunteering, that style is one in which those above give you a fixed method for doing things – you just go find people and lead them over to volunteer, then take them back at night. That’s it. But there’s no skill involved at all. Sometimes it even felt like all we were doing was simply killing time.

While ‘simply killing time’ may be at worst just a boring way to spend a day, in the most blatant and potentially harmful forms of government-directed volunteering, students have been required to forgo entire classes in order to meet the demands of state actors. A December 2011 article in the government’s own paper, the English-language *The China Daily*, was entitled ‘Volunteering not Voluntary’. The article details how third-year advertising and exposition students at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou balked when they were forced to ‘volunteer’ at the World Leisure Expo that autumn rather than attend their regularly scheduled classes. One student is quoted as saying, ‘We are not against voluntary work, but we want to have the freedom to choose when, where and for what we are doing that.’ Gu Xiaoming, a sociologist, is also cited, arguing that ‘Compulsory voluntary work of this kind is dangerous and disrespectful of students.... It could hurt their passion for good deeds like this, and essentially twist the original meaning of the word volunteer.’³³

Emotional ties and trust

As alluded to above, the meaning of the term ‘volunteer’ is indeed contested. Even outside the most obvious forms of state-led volunteering like that experienced by the Zhejiang University students, formalistic and ‘meaningless’ experiences were repeatedly recounted by my interviewees as generating a kind of alienation from one’s fellow volunteers and from the ‘service targets’ who were the ostensible beneficiaries of their activities:

In other organizations, I feel it’s more like simply doing work.... There’s not a lot of deep interaction between people. The trust you have towards people in those organizations is weaker. It’s not like just because you’re interacting with someone closely you develop the kind of trust you have with friends.

It’s very different. In my [other university group], we meet every week to talk about what we did last time, how it went. Then we’ll assign tasks for next time to various people. And after the meeting, that’s it. Seldom does anyone suggest we go out for a bite to eat or do something fun together. There’s no emotional connection there.

Such formalistic and personally disconnected experiences cast strong doubt on the ability of government-directed volunteering to build social trust and social capital. With weak, distant relations amongst members, such officially organized volunteering efforts moved some to question what the difference was between these groups and a remunerated work environment characterized by personal calculations and a getting ahead mentality. In contrast, volunteering with Bridges and Together was seen to produce a much more human experience that generated strong emotional ties. Meaningful volunteering,

in these groups, meant experiencing and investing heavily in nurturing a feeling of warmth, emotional ties, and trust.

Lots of people say that the atmosphere in [our group] is very warm. This is one of the things that attracts people and makes them keep returning. I think the atmosphere is a lot better than university clubs. It emphasizes interpersonal interactions.... The things we do you can say are for the elderly, but that's not the whole story. We also interact with each other, talking late into the night, putting our hearts close to each other.... In the Red Cross volunteer activities [run by official university clubs], there may be these things in theory, but I think that in our activities we create a truly warm atmosphere compared to typical university student organizations.

Conclusion: Formalistic volunteering and its discontents

In some ways, volunteering in China is not uniquely distant from the Tocquevillean expectations referred to earlier in this article. Young Chinese volunteers' desire for more meaningful experiences is well aligned with scholarly accounts of 'modern' volunteering that emphasize subjective motivation, self-reflexivity, and autonomy.³⁴ Yet while it is true that survey-based research typically finds that in already-democratic states, associational membership and volunteering are beneficial to social cohesion and democracy,³⁵ to expect such benefits to emerge from government-directed volunteering may be overly optimistic. China's size and diversity, of course, almost guarantee that some government-directed volunteering programmes are experienced by some young volunteers as new, exciting, and personally fulfilling. Nonetheless, there is ample reason to suspect that the perceptions and experiences reported here may be the dominant mode of 'volunteering' in China. Even in the United States, where self-directed volunteering has a long history, Nina Eliasoph's work shows convincingly that top-down 'empowerment projects' do little to build trust and can leave American youth learning less about the practice of democratic citizenship than about the preferences and priorities of those in power.³⁶

Ethnographic evidence from Japan by Akihiro Ogawa reinforces doubts about the influence of government on volunteering.³⁷ Government encouragement of citizen volunteerism in approved areas of activity, Ogawa argues, is part of a neoliberal government agenda designed to cut government costs by utilizing citizen's free time and energy to provide services the state does not wish to directly fund. Moreover, through institutionalization of volunteering in the educational system, 'a reality in Japan is that volunteering often sounds like it is mandatory' and – very similar to what young Chinese volunteers reported – a student's volunteering record could help with university admission, 'school credit, entrance examinations and employment recruitment evaluations'.³⁸ In such a system, Ogawa argues, volunteerism becomes more a Foucauldian experience of 'discipline' than a process of self-actualization holding out various possibilities of personhood and citizenship. Presaging the de-politicization argument highlighted by Eliasoph in the US context, Ogawa concludes that Japanese volunteers in government-approved non-profit organizations 'would never become social activists. They are apolitical. In general, those people advocating thoughts different from the dominant political voice are labelled "people in citizens groups", but not as "volunteers".'³⁹

There is no reliable study at present indicating the extent to which volunteerism in China operates mostly by either a bottom-up model or a top-down one. However, given the small scale of organized civil society and the powerful resources poured into capturing the 'volunteer spirit' by the Chinese state in recent years, it is likely that the majority of volunteering in China today is still organized by authorities and for official purposes. The government and the Communist Youth League have a deep penchant for numbers to quantify scale and progress, and the field of volunteering is no exception. News reports and official announcements are replete with ever-increasing quantitative measurements of some metric deemed important to those in charge. The public emphasis on quantifying and justifying state policy and achievements serves to reinforce the sense of formalism inherent in government-directed volunteering rather than the meaningfulness sought out by self-organized volunteers.

The bureaucratic logic behind ever-increasing reported numbers is quite straightforward. Under pressure from above, lower-level government and government-affiliated entities have to demonstrate their adherence to the party line in order to ensure their work is judged favourably. At both the organizational and individual level, 'political performance' is determined in part by whether officials reach pre-set targets. In the city of Dongguan in 2014, for example, an official Volunteers Association informed a local high school that it must register 100 per cent of current students as volunteers by inputting their personal information into an online database 'in order to fully meet the requirement of a city and national inspection' and meet the quota for volunteers necessary to ensure Dongguan would maintain its government-awarded 'Civilized City' status. Online reactions were swift and negative. 'Is this volunteering? In order to achieve a [government-set] target? Lots of students are unwilling', wrote one student. Another commented, 'That's how they do it! In my first year of high school it was the same.' Making a broader observation about youth and their values, one teacher wrote, 'Students are willing to volunteer, but they're against formalism. Formalism is poisoning our students' spirits. It's the culprit responsible for the collapse of morality in society.'⁴⁰

Young volunteers' dissatisfaction with government-directed volunteering is, of course, some distance from the demanding voices of legal rights activists like Xu Zhiyong and cultural iconoclasts like Ai Weiwei. And certainly their private protests are not on a par with the public calls for political reform proffered by deceased Nobel Prize winner Liu Xiaobo. Yet there is power in their quiet contestation of the purposes and meaning of volunteering. As Havel might remind us,⁴¹ while trenchant critiques by radical dissidents offer compelling visions for a different future, surely no less significant in terms of an envisioned good society are the day-to-day quiet discomforts expressed by everyday young volunteers. They are, without doubt, the immediate subjects of state efforts to control and regulate voluntary helping behaviours. It is in their quiet protests against the emptiness of formalism that we can see the agency of those whose bodies and minds would be mobilized by the state. By taking action in groups that they themselves lead, they are actively challenging state visions of volunteering and constructing a new narrative, one that finds meaning in reaching out to develop relationships with strangers and in contributing to bettering their society.

Notes

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10. See, for example, Jessica C. Teets, Post-earthquake relief and reconstruction efforts: The emergence of civil society in China?, *The China Quarterly* 198, 2009: 330–47.
11. Outi Luova, Community volunteers' associations in contemporary Tianjin: Multipurpose partners of the party-state, *Journal of Contemporary China* 20(72), 2011: 773–94.
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20. Own translation; China Communist Youth League 共青团中央 and the Chinese Young Volunteers Association 中国青年志愿者协会, 授权发布: 中国青年志愿者行动发展规划 (2014-2018) (Authorized release: China youth volunteers action development plan (2014-2018)), 2 December 2013, http://news.youth.cn/gn/201312/t20131202_4315922.htm, accessed 2 February 2015.
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22. Luova, Community volunteers' associations in contemporary Tianjin, 775.
23. Gladys Pak Lei Chong, Volunteers as the ‘new’ model citizens: Governing citizens through soft power, *China Information* 25(1), 2011: 34–5.
24. One exception to this is Ying Xu, whose discussion of the Communist Youth League does note some critical voices and that ‘the Communist Youth League had been bureaucratic and lacked communication channels between the Communist Youth League and the volunteers’; see Xu, Chinese Communist Youth League, political capital and the legitimising of volunteering in China, 107.
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36. Eliasoph, *Making Volunteers*.
37. Akihiro Ogawa, Invited by the state: Institutionalizing volunteer subjectivity in contemporary Japan, *Asian Anthropology* 3, 2004: 71–96.
38. *Ibid.*, 86 and 87.
39. *Ibid.*, 90.
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