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**VOLUNTAS: International Journal  
of Voluntary and Nonprofit  
Organizations**

Official journal of the International  
Society for Third-Sector Research

ISSN 0957-8765

Voluntas

DOI 10.1007/s11266-019-00190-9



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# Making the State's Volunteers in Contemporary China

 Ming Hu<sup>1</sup> 

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**Abstract** China has experienced a striking rise of volunteering in the past three decades while the civil society is still incipient and repressed by the authoritarian state. This seeming paradox alludes to the critical role of the state, which has been well noted but scarcely examined in the extant literature on Chinese volunteering. Analyzing 103 government documents associated with volunteering that were published between 1986 and 2017, this study explores the state's roles and motivations in fostering volunteerism. It finds that Chinese volunteering has been incorporated into the state's ruling scheme by developing a state-controlled volunteer service system. Volunteering is utilized for strengthening the state's ideological hegemony, implementing innovative social management for social stability, and facilitating the Chinese Communist Party's party building for its long-term rule. Implications and suggestions for future research are included.

**Keywords** Chinese volunteering · Civil society · Government-nonprofit relationship · Voluntary labor · Volunteers and the law

## Introduction

The past 30 years have seen a striking rise of volunteering in China. The first official volunteering organization was established as late as in 1989 (Deng 2002). However, the number of adult volunteers reached 265 million in 2018,

accounting for 25.5% of the adult population (Chu 2018). But this rise remains a conundrum: How does volunteering become popular in an authoritarian state where civil society is embryonic and repressed by the government? The dramatic increase of volunteering in the context of an authoritarian state seems to fly in the face of the extant literature that asserts that volunteerism is essential for a healthy civil society and that civil society a foundation for democracy (de Tocqueville 2003; Putnam et al. 1994). This study takes up that paradox by asking the questions including: What role does the state play in the rise of volunteerism in China? And if the state supports volunteerism, what are their motivations?

The answer to the volunteering conundrum greatly concerns China's social service system, public participation, and civil society development and has drawn increasing scholarly attentions in recent years (Shieh and Deng 2011; Xu and Ngai 2011; Zhu 2008). While some studies observed high state interventions in promoting volunteerism and made initial investigations (Deng 2002; Lu 2017; Wei 2010), few thoroughly examined the state's roles and motivations.

This study analyzes all the major laws and public policies concerning volunteering that were promulgated by the governments of the metropolitan level and above in China between 1986 and 2017. It aims to explore the state's perceptions, roles, and goals in shaping volunteerism in contemporary China. I argue that volunteerism has been incorporated into the state's ruling scheme for pursuing state goals and building state legitimacy by means of creating a comprehensive administration system of volunteer services. Specifically, volunteering is directed to strengthen the state's ideological hegemony, implement innovative social management for social stability, and facilitate the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) party building for its long-term rule. Implications and suggestions for future research are also provided.

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## Literature Review

### Volunteering and the State

As the Inter-Parliamentary Union et al. (2004) claim, “Volunteerism is an ancient and global phenomenon. Since the beginning of civilization, a fundamental human value has been people helping people and, in the process, helping themselves” (p. 7). But meanwhile, “Volunteerism is strongly influenced by the history, politics, religion and culture of communities.” Among the prominent factors are political institutions, especially the role of the state and the state–society relationship, for volunteering involves “the way societies are organized, how they allocate social responsibilities, how much engagement and participation they expect from citizens” (Anheier and Salamon 1999, p. 43).

Anheier and Salamon (1999) classify the state–voluntary sector relationship into four models: liberal, social democratic, corporatist, and statist. In the liberal model, there is a strong predisposition to curb the extension of government social welfare provision and a preference to nonprofit organizations instead. Volunteering thus is encouraged but focused on individuals’ participation in enhancing public services. In the social democratic model, volunteering receives least state restriction and mainly involves advocacy given the extensive government-delivered social welfare provision. Volunteering in the corporatist model tends to be accessory to the social welfare provision delivered by the government. Finally, in the statist model volunteering is often restrained or manipulated by the strong state to pursue state goals.

Expectedly, volunteering policies and institutions vary greatly in different models. For example, Sweden has no legal framework to regulate voluntary organizations or formalize volunteering in law partly because the independence and autonomy of the voluntary sector are seen a priority (GHK 2010). Government support for volunteering is allocated in specific projects. The UK, whereas making volunteering legislation implicit in other laws, has developed a series of volunteering institutions and programs to support volunteering affairs (GHK 2010; Rochester et al. 2010). The USA goes further to not only have passed several relevant laws but also established special federal agencies and programs to enhance volunteer service (Ludwig 2007). Compared to other democracies, Japan has moved furthest toward government intervention by conceptualizing Japanese volunteerism, establishing government-directed volunteering organizations and programs, and manipulating volunteering to serve government goals (Avenell 2010).

Governments in democracies have four major motivations to intervene in volunteering (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2009). First, volunteering makes social services more affordable or enhances the quality of these services. Second, volunteering serves to increase social capital and social inclusion. Third, volunteering improves the quality of life and career possibilities of volunteers. Finally, volunteering is conducive to democracy development and citizen participation in local governance. However, while some governments such as the UK, Sweden, and the USA call for volunteer service to rejuvenate democratic institutions and strengthen local communities, volunteering can also be channeled to apolitical social service issues but steered away from active citizenship and contentious politics, as shown in the case of Japan (Avenell 2010). In extreme cases, the state-coerced people to perform “voluntary work” to provide free labor force and practice state ideology of collectivism as seen in *subbotnik* in the Soviet Union (Juknevičius and Savicka 2003).

Thus, how does China, the largest authoritarian state that practices a socialist (state-controlled) market economy perceive volunteering and treat volunteers and volunteering organizations? What is the state’s motivation?

### The Chinese Traditions of Volunteering

In ancient China, the state had long practiced “*yaoyi*,” a government policy that required adult commoners to work for a certain amount of days without pay, mainly in military projects, public works, and government facilities (Gao 1987; Ma 2007). After the birth of PRC in 1949, the party state learned from the policy but practiced it in the name of “*yiwu laodong*,”<sup>1</sup> enlisting tens of millions of *mingong* (peasant workers) to work for building irrigation systems, water conservancy projects, and other types of public works across the country (Luo 2006; Lv 2013). The workers received very limited remuneration in the form of “*gongfen*,” a form of credit hour of work whereby a worker received necessities allocated by the village collective he/she belonged to Lv (2013). In addition, the state also mobilized people in other forms of *yiwu laodong* concerning sanitation, reforestation, and so forth, which occurred at the organizational or neighborhood level and usually were unpaid (Zhang and Yang 2013).

Admittedly, in addition to the Chinese *yaoyi* tradition, another important source of *yiwu laodong* was *subbotnik* that was introduced from the Soviet Union but originated from the Marxist ideology of “voluntary labor.” According

<sup>1</sup> *yiwu* can denote both duty and no pay in Chinese, the root word of which is *yi* (义), meaning justice or righteousness. Therefore, *yiwu laodong* can be translated as both voluntary labor and out-of-duty labor.

to Marx (1975), in the communist society the commodity–monetary relations shall disappear and “labor is no longer merely a means of life but has become life’s principal need” (p. 119). Intoxicated by the idealism of quickly reaching communism, the state established a planned economy by keeping all means of production under government control and coerced people to work “selflessly” for the state and the collective. People were often organized to work for free outside their regular jobs (Zhang and Yang 2013). Such *yiwu laodong* lasted for nearly four decades till the mid-1990s when the state affirmed its epochal shift to a market economy in which individuals’ labor force became “commodity” again and could no longer be used by the state without paying remuneration.

Partly in order to alleviate the grievance against the actual coercion in *yiwu laodong*, the state made a lot of *sixiang jiaoyu* (ideological education) efforts, among which was the prominent “Learn-from-Lei-Feng” campaign that began in 1963 (Li 2003). Lei Feng, an ordinary soldier and party member, was vehemently propagandized as a supreme role model, from whom party members and the masses were required to learn “the spirit of serving the people with all the mind and heart” in terms of thoughts and deeds (Li 2003). After the waves of political movements in which the campaign was highly orchestrated for political purposes, its helping component has been incorporated into the rising modern volunteerism by the Communist Youth League (CYL) that pioneered and has led volunteer service in contemporary China (Li 2003; Zhang and Yang 2013). But the ideological education component of the campaign still sporadically sparkles in the state’s propaganda project.

### The Rise of Modern Volunteerism in China

Modern volunteerism arose in China in the late 1980s (Zhang and Yang 2013; Lu 2017). It differed from the former forms of “voluntary work” in that people have been able to contribute their labor largely free from coercion (in other words, with no fear of punishment from nonparticipation) and with no intention of seeking political or material interests from such contributions. The rise of volunteerism resulted from the termination of state-coerced labor, the rise of self-awareness and civic engagement, the upsurge of voluntary associations, and the learning of volunteering practice from overseas, all thanks to the then newly established “Reform and Opening Up” strategy (Ding et al. 2007; Lu 2017; Zhu 2008). In 1989, Tianjin witnessed the birth of the first neighborhood-based volunteer group in the country. One year later, the first volunteers’ association was officially registered in Shenzhen. The pioneering volunteering action was soon noticed and supported by the CYL which thus launched the far-reaching

“Chinese Youth Volunteers” program in 1993 and a series of other volunteering programs. But Chinese volunteers were still handful, limited to young people, and largely reliant on state agencies in terms of recruitment and management. Volunteerism has not become popular until 2008 when millions of volunteers spontaneously acted to serve in the Sichuan Earthquake relief and in the Beijing Olympics and made volunteering a new social fashion. Chinese volunteering has since experienced a rapid growth that has not ended yet.

While many studies (e.g., Lu 2017; Wei 2010; Zhang et al. 2011) noticed the prominent influence of the state on volunteering affairs, few scrutinized the state’s roles and goals in volunteering development specifically from the state perspective. This study aims to examine how the state perceives volunteering and deals with volunteers and volunteer organizations and contributes to understanding the whole landscape of the state–voluntary sector relationship in contemporary China.

### Methods and Data

One effective way of understanding the state’s roles in enhancing volunteering is to analyze the legislative and public policy documents created by state authorities, as the documents dictate the state’s opinions and measures which are practiced with the state’s will.

Having emerged in ancient China, the word “*zhiyuan* (志愿)” denotes both committed aspiration and being voluntary. However, its combination with “*fuwu* (服务-service)” to refer to volunteering and with “*zhe* (者 person)” to refer to volunteer began to sporadically appear in government documents as late as in the 1980s. The state’s expressional shift from “*yiwu laodong*” to “*zhiyuan fuwu*” indicated its acceptance of the voluntary dimension of volunteering, partly due to the far-reaching CYL’s youth volunteering initiatives and the introduction of overseas volunteering programs during that period (Ding et al. 2007; Lu 2017). However, the use of “*fuwu*,” a core word in the CCP’s mission statement “serve the people,” indicates that volunteering is also connected with the state’s political rhetoric.

Since the government acceptance of modern volunteering, China’s volunteering policies have gone through three phases. First, a few volunteering-related measures primarily appeared in the policies concerning “Learn-from-Lei-Feng” activities and citizens’ moral conduct between the 1980s and 1990s. Second, the central government has since the early 2000s begun actively promoting volunteering and made special policies, marked by the release of the 2002 *Rules of Registering and Managing Youth Volunteers in China (Provisional)* by the CYL (2002). In the following



years, a few central government departments and local governments also made special measures to enhance volunteer service. Third, a relatively complete policy system was established between 2008 and 2017. Specifically, the powerful CCP Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization (henceforth the Central Commission) released its *Opinions on Deeply Performing Volunteering Activities* in 2008, which began a new era of volunteering legislation in China. A capstone of the volunteering policy development was the passage of the *Volunteer Service Ordinance* by the State Council in 2017. They were followed by many central government departments and local governments that made special policies in their domains. This institutional development phase has not fully completed as many specific measures are to be developed or adjusted to effectively implement the general policies.

In this study, I collected all the major policy documents related to volunteering that were released by the governments of metropolitan and higher levels between 1986 and 2017. The collection includes one law (the 2016 *Charity Law*), 28 national policies focusing on volunteering, and 20 national policies and presidential speeches that do not focus on but relate to volunteering. In addition, a total of 54 policy documents promulgated by the local authorities were also collected to supplement central government policies, including six from Beijing and 48 from other provinces, provincial capitals, and all the largest cities that have made special local policies for promoting volunteerism by the end of 2018.

After collecting the documents, I thoroughly read each piece and made several rounds of coding and recoding by identifying the elements of interest, developing topics, and making repetitive comparisons across time, themes, and areas (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The coding process ends with saturated information from the archival analysis.

## Results

According to the *Regulation of Volunteer Registration in China* (CYL 2013), “A volunteer refers to the person who uses his/her own time, skills, and other resources to voluntarily provide service to the country, society, and others, with no purpose of seeking material remuneration.” And such a volunteer’s act is defined as “volunteer service.” This definition of volunteering has two noteworthy bearings. First, volunteering is emphasized as a kind of “service” and thus marginalizes (if not totally excludes) expression, the other fundamental element defining voluntary association and civil society (Frumkin 2005). Consequently, expression-related volunteering areas such as policy advocacy and public education may be regarded as illegal by the state. Second, this definition identifies

country as a primary recipient of volunteer service. However, the meaning of “country (*guojia*)” in Chinese is multiple and ambiguous. The word can refer both to the state apparatus and to all the people and institutions within a sovereign state, which are often seen a united one (Xiang 2010). This conceptual ambiguity may foreshadow the state’s strong intervention in volunteering. In fact, by placing the service-oriented volunteering totally under state control, the state has incorporated volunteerism into its ruling scheme to serve its spiritual civilization (*jingshen wenming*) campaign, innovative social management, and the CCP’s party building, as presented below.

## The Establishment of State-Controlled Volunteerism

The state has developed a comprehensive system to administer volunteer service, which comprises an integrated leadership structure, objective setting, resource provision, operations management, and evaluation mechanisms.

First, the state has established a top-down leadership structure in charge of volunteering affairs that operates throughout the government system of all levels (State Council of China 2017). At the national level, the Central Commission (2008) takes on overall leadership on behalf of the CCP Central Committee and has authority to coordinate all other state apparatus in making and implementing volunteering policies. The Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) as a government department oversees volunteer service administrative work such as developing and budgeting volunteering policies, registering and inspecting volunteering organizations, managing public procurement of volunteer service projects, and if necessary, directly promoting neighborhood-based volunteering. The Communist Youth League (CYL) Central Committee, “the Party’s assistant and reserve force,” generally manages the organization of volunteer services, including mobilizing volunteers, establishing and supervising volunteer organizations, and developing and operating volunteering programs. Other *renmin tuanti* (people’s organizations) such as the All-China Federation of Trade Union, the All-China Women’s Federation, and the Red Cross Society of China, which in fact are secondary state apparatus, are responsible for promoting volunteerism and organizing volunteers in their own domains. Finally, other state organs shall also assume responsibility of assisting in enhancing volunteerism if in need. This leadership structure at the national level is generally duplicated at the provincial, municipal, and county levels along the hierarchy of the state apparatus and thus keeps Chinese volunteerism under direct state management.

One prominent organizational vehicle to practice the state leadership in volunteering is the “volunteer service

federation” model that has arisen in recent years. Take the Beijing Volunteer Service Federation (BVSF) for example. BVSF was established in 2009 by the CCP Beijing Committee and the Beijing Municipal Government (2009) to serve as “a hub organization to unite the volunteer organizations originating from different government departments, trades, and sectors.” It was registered as an independent nonprofit organization but has many powerful state agencies serve as its “*lishi danwei* (organizational member of the board of directors).” Supervised principally by the CYL Beijing Committee, BVSF is designed to “politically give full play to the bridging and linking among the Party, the government, and the variety of volunteer organizations, practically give full play to the leading and uniting function by providing a platform for the operations of various volunteer organizations and for the growth of numerous volunteers, and administratively perform routine management and coordination for various volunteer organizations according to its bylaws and authorization from the state” (Ibid).

Second, the state sets specific objectives for volunteerism development. The *Guidance on Building Social Service Volunteer Teams in China: 2013–2020* (MCA 2013) describes the medium-term goals of volunteering development such as increasing the size of volunteer population, improving the *suzhi* (human quality) of volunteers, strengthening volunteer teams, enhancing the institutional environment of volunteer service, and improving volunteering performance. Specifically, the guidance states that “In 2020, the number of registered volunteers shall account for no less than 10% of the national population.” The CCP Publicity Department and other state organs (2016) went further to claim that “(The primary goal) is to finish the establishment of a volunteer service administration system till 2020 that is suitable for social and economic development, well-structured, well-managed, all-embracing, and energetic” and reaffirmed MCA’s 2013 *Guidance*. To meet this primary goal, the *Volunteer Service Ordinance* (State Council of China, 2017) stipulates that “The governments at the county and higher levels shall include volunteer service in their economic and social development planning.”

Third, the state provides rich resources to support volunteerism. (a) Several measures are taken to fund volunteering activities, including general government budgeting, social welfare lottery, public procurement, and special government grants. For example, the CCP Publicity Department et al. (2016) required that “The local governments shall gradually increase the size and scope of fiscal support for the growth of volunteering organizations, make favorable tax policies for them, and substantially implement tax deduction measures. (They) shall actively develop government procurement and support volunteering

organizations to contract government procurement projects based on their strengths. The leadership of state organs and the masses’ organizations (*qunzhong zuzhi*) shall provide financial support for the volunteering activities organized by their internal volunteer groups.” The 2017 *Volunteer Service Ordinance* stipulates that “The governments of all levels and their agencies are allowed to lawfully support the operations of volunteer services through government procurement and other manners.”

(b) Local governments are encouraged to support the establishment of volunteer organization incubators that provide office rooms and facilities, seed grants, training, and other resources for volunteer service start-ups (e.g., CCP Publicity Department et al. 2016). So far, such incubators have emerged in Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Wuhan, Hangzhou, and other metropolitan areas and even expanded to some small and medium cities.

(c) Propaganda organs are widely used to promote volunteerism. The Central Commission (2008) required that “(The state) shall actually reinforce the promotion of volunteer service, fully utilize mass communication means such as magazines, radios, televisions, the Internet, and cell phones, and use news coverage, editorials, and nonprofit advertisements to publicize volunteerism, promote good volunteering practices and good stories of volunteers, lead the public view to respect volunteers and their contributions, and finally creates a strong moral atmosphere for volunteer service.” Consequently, the People’s Daily, the top “mouthpiece of the Party,” published nearly 1000 articles titled by volunteering in the past 10 years.

Fourth, the state directly intervenes in the operations of volunteer services, including recruiting and registering volunteers, nurturing and registering volunteer organizations, defining the scope of volunteer service, and directly managing major volunteering programs.

- (a) *Volunteer recruitment and registration* The state encourages and mobilizes people, usually those working for state-related institutions, to volunteer. For example, the CCP Publicity Department et al. (2016) required that “Party and government cadres of all levels should serve as a role model of volunteering outside their office hours. (The state) calls for civil servants, technicians, employees of enterprises and public service units, public figures and others to actively join volunteer organizations and participate in volunteer service. Members of the CCP and the CYL should show a good example for other people.” Moreover, volunteers are encouraged to register with a state-affiliated organization. The Central Commission (2008) required that “(The state) shall thoroughly execute volunteer registration tasks, entrust national volunteer

organizations that were established by government agencies and industry associations to develop and improve volunteer registration systems and volunteering information platforms, and keep the systems and platforms well connected to share data." The state also tries to develop a unified volunteer registration system. The CYL (2013) stipulated that "To facilitate the unified management of registered volunteers across the country, registered volunteers will receive an identity number that is nationwide valid." So far, many national and local volunteering information platforms have been developed to register volunteers and manage volunteering projects. Popular platforms include "China Volunteers ([www.chinavolunteer.cn](http://www.chinavolunteer.cn))," "Beijing Volunteers ([www.bv2008.cn](http://www.bv2008.cn))," Guangdong Zhiyuanshi App, and Hangzhou Zhiyuanhui App, all of which are managed or supervised by CYL organizations.

- (b) *Fostering and registering volunteer organizations* The state "encourages state agencies, people's organizations, enterprises, public service units, social organizations and grassroots autonomous organizations to establish volunteer groups, and guides the institutions of social wellbeing and public service to welcome volunteers' assistance" (CCP Publicity Department et al. 2016). The CYL (2013), the primary volunteer organizer, stated that "CYL branches at the municipal and county levels shall widely establish volunteering organizations and volunteers' associations and equip them with special personnel in charge of registering and managing volunteers...the local CYL branches shall promote volunteerism by establishing volunteers' associations and volunteer service stations, fostering volunteering partnerships, developing volunteer teams and so forth." However, volunteering organizations must be "legal organizations" that are either sanctioned by the MCA system or authorized by a state agency (primarily the CYL) before they can recruit volunteers. Otherwise they may be punished, as stipulated in the *Shanghai Volunteer Service Ordinance* (Shanghai Municipal Congress 2009): "The unregistered organizations that carry out (volunteering) activities without approval will be banned by the civil affairs authorities of the municipal, district or county level and be stripped of their illegal possessions."
- (c) *Defining the scope of volunteer service* Not all types of volunteer services are welcome for the state. The CYL (2013) stated that "The major volunteering areas include poverty alleviation, assistance to senior citizens and the disabled, community services, ecological development, great public events, disaster

management, social management, cultural development, West China development, and overseas services." The CCP Publicity Department et al. (2016) further required that "(The state) shall instruct volunteer organizations to make clear the direction of services by centering on the priorities of the Party and the government and on what the masses need and expect, and continuously enhance volunteer services concerning poverty, care for senior citizens and orphans, aid to illnesses, disability, and disasters, medical care, education, great social events, and other important areas."

- (d) *Managing major volunteering programs* The state directly manages important volunteering projects especially concerning political summit meetings (e.g., the Hangzhou G20 Summit), international sports and games (e.g., the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games), and large-scale exhibition events (e.g., the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition). An example was the 2016 Hangzhou G20 Summit when the CYL Hangzhou Committee directly managed volunteer service by coordinating other CCP and government agencies, higher education institutions, and voluntary organizations (Shen et al. 2017). A centralized management structure consisting of three major levels of management unit was established, staffed by more than 200 cadres sent from CYL branches, government agencies, and universities. Over 4000 volunteers working in the meeting places were recruited primarily from local colleges by university administrators. In addition, many government agencies and *renmin tuanti* have developed regular volunteering programs in their domains. For example, the CYL launched the "Chinese Youth Volunteers" program in 1993, the MCA started "Community Service Volunteers" in around 2005, the Commission on Integrated Social Management leads "Peace Volunteers," and the All-China Women's Federation supervises "Women Volunteers."

Fifth, the state supervises and evaluates volunteers, volunteering organizations, and volunteering programs and manages incentive measures. The *Community-Based Volunteer Registration Rules* (Chinese Association of Social Workers 2005) regulates that civil affairs authorities and authorized volunteer organizations assume the responsibility of grading neighborhood-based volunteers' performance and granting honorary titles (e.g., Star 1-5 Volunteer, National Star Volunteer, etc.). The CYL (2013) also developed its rules of rewarding youth volunteers and volunteer teams. In addition to honorary titles and awards, excellent volunteers can also receive other forms of



benefits. The State Council of China (2017) stipulated that “The recruitment of civil servants and employees of public service units can take into account the applicant’s volunteering record,” and that the government should “encourage public service providers to give privilege to the volunteers with a good record.” In contrast, “unqualified” volunteers may be disciplined. For example, the Chinese Association of Social Workers (2005) stated that “Registered volunteers shall be deregistered for 1 year if they volunteer for less than 15 h in the past year, or fail to meet other requirements, and thus are graded as unqualified. Their volunteer identity card shall be recalled and their performance be recorded in their personal archive.” The CYL (2013) similarly stated that “The volunteer organization can deregister the volunteers who refuse to fulfill their responsibility.”

Evaluated are also volunteering organizations and projects. The CCP Publicity Department et al. (2016) stipulated that “(The state) shall regularly assess the infrastructure, internal governance, organizational performance, and social appraisal of volunteering organizations and decide government procurement, social financial support, and other favorable government policies largely based on the evaluation results.” Thus, the CYL regularly performs evaluations to select and award excellent volunteering organizations and projects (CYL 2013).

Lastly but not the least, volunteering has become an indicator measuring regional development, as the Central Commission (2008) stated, “(The government of all levels) shall have volunteering activities as an important component and indicator when building civilized cities, civilized towns and villages, and civilized work units.” The 2013 MCA Guidance (MCA 2013) also reads “(The government) shall include the development of social service volunteer teams in the assessment system of local social development and assess it by the criteria regarding team building, projects, social effects, and economic value.”

The text above presents a state-controlled volunteering regime, which is being established in order to help build spiritual civilization for the state’s ideological hegemony, enhance innovative social management, and strengthen the CCP’s party building as shown below.

### Volunteering for Building Spiritual Civilization

Spiritual civilization refers to a dominant belief system whereby the CCP claims its exclusive spiritual leadership and preempts the emergence of alternative beliefs that may threaten its rule (Chen 1998). In recent years, spiritual civilization has increasingly been directed to strengthen the state’s ideological hegemony by emphasizing moral–ideological indoctrination which is practiced through *leifeng jingshen* (the Spirit of Lei Feng) and volunteer service.

### *Spiritual Civilization for Rebuilding Ideological Hegemony*

Spiritual civilization was raised by the CCP in the early 1980s to address the “corruptive influence of capitalist vulgar culture” arising with the establishment of a market economy and to serve the state’s “economy as the center” grand strategy by providing “spiritual momentum and intellectual support” (CCP Central Committee 1986). While delivering a positive narrative of progress in the first years, spiritual civilization has apparently shifted to serve the rebuilding of the party state’s ideological hegemony after the 1989 Protests (Chen 1998). Facing the weakened communist ideology and the challenge of market-driven thoughts, the party state has resorted to moral–ideological indoctrination to consolidate its ideological legitimacy under the banner of spiritual civilization.

One prominent strategy is to reintegrate private and public morality into the state’s ideological practice and thus subject them to state regulation. The 1996 *CCP Plenum Resolution* (CCP Central Committee 1996) states:

The socialist ideology and morality embody the nature and direction of the construction of spiritual civilization and has great agency for social, political, and economic development. In the whole process of the reform and opening up, the basic task of moral–ideological construction is adhering to the education of patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, strengthening the construction of public morality, professional morality, and family morality, and guiding people to set up the common ideal of building socialism with Chinese characteristics and to establish correct world outlooks, correct life outlooks, and correct values.

The state even established moral institutions to discipline private and public morality. After describing these general requirements as noted above, the state continued to state that “(The state) shall specify and standardize these major contents and make them the codes of conduct that are well accepted and naturally observed by all the citizens” (CCP Central Committee 2001). This resulted in the rise of the “Citizens’ Morality Construction Project (*gongmin daode jianshe gongcheng*)” and the emergence of numerous of compacts and behavioral standards made in various work units (*danwei*), trade associations, and neighborhood organizations across the country as seen in the past two decades (Dynon 2008).

Furthermore, the state has enhanced ideological control by emphasizing the paramount importance of “Marxism and its innovative development in China,” strengthening ideological institutions, and reinforcing ideological discipline. According to the Central Commission (2017), building spiritual civilization should “consolidate the

guiding position of Marxism in ideological domains, and thus consolidate the common ideological base for the united struggle of all the Party and the Chinese people of all ethnicities.” Spiritual civilization is expected to “provide firm ideological guarantee, strong spiritual momentum, rich moral nutrition, and excellent cultural conditions” for “realizing the ‘two one-hundred-year-old goals’ and realize the Chinese dream of the great Chinese revival” (Ibid). Ideological discipline is also reinforced that people should “enhance the consciousness of political (correctness), of the big picture, of the core leadership, and of aligning (with the CCP leadership)” (Ibid).

#### *The Spirit of Lei Feng for Implementing Moral–Ideological Indoctrination*

To facilitate the moral–ideological indoctrination, the “Spirit of Lei Feng” was rediscovered from history to set up a role model that embodies many good human qualities expected of ordinary people by the state. According to the General Office of the CCP Central Committee (2012), learning the spirit includes “carrying forward the noble ideal and firm belief of loving the Party, loving the motherland, and loving socialism, carrying on Lei Feng’s professionalism of devoting to and excelling at his job, carrying on Lei Feng’s spirit of innovation with forging ahead and being self-reliant, and carrying on Lei Feng’s innovativeness with working hard and being thrifty.” Owing to these desired qualities as claimed, Lei Feng has been set up as a perfect Marxist moral model: “Lei Feng was a model of practicing socialist and communist morality...the Spirit of Lei Feng embodies the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation, adapts to the social progress trend in the times, and highlights the Party’s progressiveness” (Ibid).

Therefore, the party state has greatly promoted the Spirit of Lei Feng for implementing its moral–ideological indoctrination project (Ibid):

Under the new situation, deeply learning from Lei Feng and carrying on the Spirit of Lei Feng is of great significance in inspiring people’s enthusiasm in moral-ideological construction, advocating civilized life fashions, correcting moral abnormality and social distrust, raising the levels of social morality, and guiding people to be inheritors of Chinese traditional virtues, actors of socialist moral norms, and creators of good social mores.

To practice the Spirit of Lei Feng, the state sets up a special “Learn-from-Lei-Feng Day” on every March 5, organizes the selection of national moral models, promotes best practices of learning from Lei Feng, and, most importantly, promotes volunteer services.

#### *Volunteerism as an Agent of the Spirit of Lei Feng*

The Learn-from-Lei-Feng campaign has often been criticized for being formalistic as many activities focus on learning by words or irregular helping behaviors (Li 2003). Owing to its action orientation and regularity, volunteer service has been incorporated by the state as an agent of the Spirit of Lei Feng since its rise in the early 1990s. *The Opinions on Deeply Performing Learn-from-Lei-Feng Activities* (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2012) states that “(Learning from Lei Feng) should focus on enhancing citizens’ moral–ideological qualities and the levels of social civilization, focus on inheriting and carrying on the Spirit of Lei Feng, put youth volunteering first, and have volunteer service as the agent.” Another document released by the Personnel Department of the CCP Beijing Committee and other institutions (2014) also clearly writes that “Volunteer service is the capable agent of promoting Learn-from-Lei-Feng and regularly propagandizing moral models.” The integration of volunteering into the Learn-from-Lei-Feng campaign has even created a new term, “Learn-from-Lei-Feng volunteer service (*xue-leifeng zhiyuan fuwu*)” (e.g., Central Commission 2017), the meaning of which yet remains the same as volunteer service.

Consequently, volunteering is seen an important vehicle for implementing socialist morality construction and spiritual civilization, just as claimed by the Central Commission (2008), “Volunteer service...is conducive to advocating the basic moral norms such as patriotism, devotion to profession, sincerity, and friendliness, enhancing citizens’ moral-ideological qualities, and effectively performing the task of constructing the socialist core value system.” Thereby, “The party committees and governments of all levels should treat developing volunteerism as a great task for constructing spiritual civilization and put it on their major agenda” (Ibid).

#### **Volunteering for Implementing Innovative Social Management**

The state has started its “innovative social management” project since the mid-2000s by implementing a state corporatist strategy that combines CCP leadership and depoliticized governance techniques to pursue social stability (Pieke 2012). As the sixth Session of the 16th CCP Central Committee (2006) declared, “(The state) must innovate the social management regime, integrate social management resources, improve social management capacity, and make a sound social management pattern in which the Party leads, the government takes responsibility, the society collaborates, and the public participates. (The state) shall give service to conduct management and

manage with giving service.” What distinguish the new social management regime from the old, as claimed by the state, are two characteristics: the union of service and management and the engagement of social organizations and the public. Volunteer service thus is regarded a prefect device for implementing such innovations.

Volunteering is promoted first to supplement the public services in which the government takes major responsibility. As the Central Commission (2008) claimed, “Volunteer service covers many areas and has wide networks, is able to widely mobilize social resources to make up for the shortage of the services provided by the government and the market, and thereby shares the government’s burdens and alleviates the masses’ difficulties.” Volunteer service is even identified as one of major mechanisms for providing social services which include “government mechanism, mutual help mechanism, volunteering mechanism, and market mechanism” (State Council of China 2006). To make best of volunteering, the MCA (2013) aimed to “make the number, quality, and structure of social service volunteer teams meet the needs of building harmonious socialist society and meet the ever-increasing needs of social services of our social members, especially the needy.”

In addition, volunteering is intended to facilitate “social management” by easing social conflicts and regulating citizens’ behaviors. For example, the Central Commission (2008) claims that “(Volunteer service is) conducive to forming a social atmosphere and interpersonal relationship of solidarity and mutual assistance, equality and friendliness, and common progress, increasing harmonious factors, promoting fairness and justice, and preserving social stability.” Another government document (MCA 2013) also argues that “(Volunteer service) is an important approach for meeting the masses’ needs, coordinating social relations, settling social conflicts, and enhancing social harmony.” However, volunteerism is expected to serve social management also by regulating citizens’ thoughts and behaviors. The Central Commission (2008) stipulated, “(The state) shall perfuse volunteer service requirements into social management and embody them in urban residents’ compacts, villagers’ compacts, students’ codes of conduct, and professional ethics, and make volunteer service people’s self-conscious acts and life styles.”

Finally, volunteering organizations can participate in the state’s social management system as a type of “social organization (*shehui zuzhi*)” which refers to nonprofit organizations unaffiliated with the state. One critical strategy in the innovative social management is to engage social organizations and the public in managing public affairs and providing public services, as announced in Jintao’s (2012) presidential speech at the CCP 18th Plenum:

(The state) shall correctly handle the relationship between the government and the society, speed up the implementation of separating societal components from the government, and prompt social organizations to develop clear rights and responsibilities, self-governance, and appropriate functions. (The state) shall entrust social organizations with public services and matters which social organizations are fit to address. (The state) shall support and develop volunteer service organizations.

By integrating volunteering organizations into the state-led social service system by means of various government–social organization partnerships, the state thus can benefit from volunteer services that are provided for free and often in effective and innovative manners on one hand and absorb citizens’ interest of public participation on the other, both of which will contribute to social stability and state legitimacy.

### Volunteering for the CCP’s Party Building

Party building (*dangjian*) is the “reinforcement and improvement of (the CCP’s) self-construction” which centers on the party’s ruling capacity and progressiveness (CCP Central Committee 2009). Volunteerism is orchestrated to facilitate party building in three ways: cultivating party members, enhancing the capacity of grassroots party organizations (GPOs), and strengthening the organization of the CCP.

First, volunteerism helps cultivate “party spirit (*dangxing*)” in party members facing China’s socialist market economy. According to Luo (2016), “Practicing party spirit is to unwaveringly execute what the Party demands, volitionally stay off what the Party prohibits, and most fundamentally, have the same heart and mind with the Party” (p. 6) to ensure internal solidarity and power centralization within the CCP. A Party document released by the Personnel Department of the CCP Beijing Committee et al. (2014) detailed how volunteerism may contribute to the Party members’ party spirit cultivation. First, volunteering helps fulfill the party’s mission “serve the people” as it produces social services without pursuing personal benefits: “The Party and CYL members’ participation in volunteer service helps carry on the Spirit of Lei Feng, helps advance social civilization, and helps better fulfill the Party’s mission and serve the people.” Second, volunteering helps keep in close contact with the masses, which is seen fundamental for preserving the Party’s representativeness and progressiveness. As the document states, “Taking the lead in volunteer service ... helps better observe social situations, notice the masses’ viewpoints, enhance the masses’ livelihood, and thus make stronger the

Party's flesh and blood connections with the people." Third, volunteering helps the party take the lead in shaping social fashions because Party member volunteers can "utilize the Party's style of work to enhance the government's style of work and the social mores, produce a widespread exemplary effect in the whole society, stimulate the masses' enthusiasm in participating in urban governance, gather positive energy for social morality construction, and promote the new fashions of social civilization and progress." Finally, volunteering helps improve the Party members' competence of serving the people, because through volunteer service they can "delve deeply into social reality, modestly learn from the masses, sincerely take responsibility for the masses, and enthusiastically serve the masses."

Second, volunteering can facilitate GPOs to practice the CCP's mass line "from the masses, to the masses" and improve the GPOs' leading capacity. "Facing new situations and new tasks" in the market economy, decides the General Office of the CCP Central Committee (2014), "GPOs should change the ways of work and improve the style of work, see service a self-conscious pursuit and a basic duty, infuse leadership and management into service, and through giving service stay close with the masses, unite the masses, guide the masses, and win the masses." Volunteer service can forge links between GPOs and nonparty people in a popular way and meanwhile improves GPOs' capacity of leading the masses via service provision. In addition, providing volunteer services to people, especially those in need, can "continuously strengthen the party's class base and expand the party's mass base so that the party always receive approval and support from the masses" (CCP Central Committee 2009).

Third, volunteering facilitates the organizational development of the CCP. Party building in social organizations (including volunteer organizations), given their rapidly growing population, serves social management and enhances the CCP's leadership, as stated by the General Office of the CCP Central Committee (2015):

(Party building) guides them the right development direction, stimulates their vitality, and helps them play a bigger role in the national governance system and in the modernization of the Party's governing capacity. It closely unites social organizations and their employees around the Party, continuously increases the Party's influence in social organizations, consolidates the Party's class base, expands the Party's mass base, and strengthens the party's ruling foundation.

Consequently, establishing party organizations in social organizations becomes both necessary and beneficial. The CCP Publicity Department et al. (2016) stipulated, "The

qualified volunteering organizations shall set up a party organization.... the unqualified volunteering organizations shall find a supervisory organization to guide their party building and build a party organization when the conditions are ripe."

The CCP branch established within a volunteer organization thus becomes a GPO and will have to work like any other GPOs. It is expected to "conduct a serious organizational life, perform strict political discipline, political rules, and organizational discipline, and give full play to the party organization's political functions and roles" (General Office of the CCP Central Committee 2015). Insofar, the state has established a dual control system within volunteering organizations: the registration authorities supervise administration affairs and the party supervises political affairs. Volunteering organizations have thus been fully incorporated into the party state's ruling apparatus to directly serve the state's purposes.

### Volunteering and Individual Development

The state also considers the volunteering effect on individual volunteers, but limits it to apolitical interests. First, the state acknowledges and supports volunteers' individual development. The Central Commission (2008) acknowledged that "Volunteer service is various and flexible, and well adaptable to the new characteristics of the great changes in social structures, organizational forms of the society, and patterns of societal interests. It can meet the willingness of people of different walks of life to care about others, serve the society, and use their talents." Therefore, the state encourages volunteers to "realize self-help, self-fulfillment, and self-enhancement" through "the combination of conducting volunteer service and realizing individual development so that people can enrich personal experience and increase individual competence when bringing warmth to others and contributing to the society" (Ibid).

Second, the volunteering policies protect the basic rights of volunteers and volunteering organizations. One general principle for recruiting volunteers is "mobilize widely but (allow people to) participate voluntarily" (MCA 2013). The *Volunteer Service Ordinance* (State Council of China, 2017) clearly prohibits "coercively assigning service tasks to volunteers or volunteering organizations." In addition, the *Rules of Managing Registered Volunteers in China* (CYL 2013) lists volunteers' basic rights, including the rights to participate in volunteering activities, receive training, raise suggestions, deregister volunteer identity, and some others. However, few laws or policies involve the rights of volunteers or volunteering organizations in terms of public participation and democracy development, which



are among the “core socialist values” (Hu 2012) and are propagandized everywhere in the country, though.

## Discussion

Admittedly, volunteerism in China has made a great progress from state-coerced *yiwu laodong* to the state-promoted “Learn-from-Lei-Feng volunteer service.” Partly due to the establishment of a market economy in which labor power becomes a commodity, the state has to respect individuals’ (especially nonparty members) autonomy in using their own time and protects their freedom from coerced work. But the tradition of high state intervention joins the state’s utilitarian adoption of modern volunteerism, making a strong statist model (Anheier and Salamon 1999) of Chinese volunteering in at least two aspects: a service-only orientation and state requisitioning.

First, the state defines volunteering principally from the perspective of social service and excludes expressive forms of volunteering such as political participation and advocacy from its receptive scope. However, expression is a critical function and goal for volunteers and volunteering organizations (David Smith 2001) as people seek to speak out and pursue their values and interests by volunteering their time for certain public or collective interests. Stripping the expressive component of volunteerism or allowing only state-approved expression may discourage value-based and advocacy volunteering that seeks to promote certain values or group interests. This restriction can also hamstring volunteering organizations’ capacity of representing minority groups and damage pluralism in the public and political life which is regarded as a critical value of the voluntary sector (Frumkin 2005; Rosenblum 1998).

Second, the state seeks to place volunteer service completely under its control by building a blanket management system and steers it to serve state goals. In other words, volunteer service has been incorporated as part of the state’s ruling apparatus. In a positive light, such state-requisitioned volunteering helps meet the individuals’ increasing needs of participating in public life and realizing self-worth. But can a state-managed volunteering system foster a true sense of voluntarism among citizens? Whereas it is globally prevalent for governments to promote volunteerism through state-supported programs and institutions, state intervention in volunteer service remains controversial (e.g., Avenell 2010; GHK 2010; Rochester et al. 2010). One major concern is that as long as state power makes inroads in volunteering and manipulates volunteering for its own purposes, volunteering becomes another face of the state and very possibly loses the very value which the state may have pursued: voluntarism, pluralism, civic engagement, and social innovation, all

deriving from the autonomy of individual citizens and of their organizations (Anheier 2004; Frumkin 2005). Furthermore, state absorption of volunteer organizations risks either remaking a totalitarian society in which the state controls every aspect of public life, as warned by some researchers (e.g., Kang 2018), or leaving behind an enervated voluntary sector in a long run as noted in post-communist countries (Voicu and Voicu 2009).

Some questions are left to future research. First, how are the volunteering policies being in fact practiced by the state organs of various regions and levels? Public policy implementation in China is often complicated by governmental fragmentation (Mertha 2009), local state corporatism (Oi 1992), and government formalism (Li 2013). Volunteering issues, however greatly the state leadership stresses, are substantially on the edge of state functioning. Therefore, volunteering policies are largely subject to government capacity and citizen participation at the local level, which vary across the country and commands future investigations.

Second, how does state intervention influence people’s perception, motivation, and behavior of volunteering? While the state invests volunteering with many predetermined values, characteristics and approaches, how people perceive them and respond is another story and needs close examinations. The past years have seen a rise of volunteering in China that is organized by nonprofit organizations, neighborhood organizations, and even corporations, in addition to the growth of state-managed volunteering (Xu and Ngai 2011; Zhang et al. 2011). Provided volunteering is still voluntary and open to citizens’ volition, it must make latitude for people of different backgrounds to perceive it differently and have the freedom to make different decisions. This calls for future research to not only evaluate the effects of official volunteering policies but also to reveal the specific mechanisms of volunteer participation in contemporary China.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to the understanding of the state’s roles and motivations in shaping Chinese volunteering and enriches the literature on the government–volunteering relationship. It finds that China has established a comprehensive and centralized volunteering policy system in which the state controls almost everything including the scope of volunteering, leadership structures, planning, resources, major programs, and evaluations. This finding helps unveil the conundrum of the striking rise of volunteering in the past years. When enhancing citizens’ volunteer participation, however, the state seeks to incorporate volunteering in its ruling scheme to promote spiritual



civilization, improve social management, and strengthen the CCP's party building. The state-led politicization of volunteering in China contrasts with the government-promoted volunteering for political participation in the western world (GHK 2010; Rochester et al. 2010) and requests comparative policy analysis research in the future.

This study also contributes to revealing the complexity of the relations between the state, volunteering, and civil society, a research area which has globally drawn scholarly attentions but remains little scrutinized in the extent literature (Rochester et al. 2010). While rigorously repressing independent (especially rights-based) voluntary organizations (Heurlin 2010; Kang 2018; Teets 2015), the authoritarian state in China greatly supports volunteering but seeks to place it under complete control and manipulates volunteering to strengthen state legitimacy. Consequently, the growth of volunteering in China unnecessarily leads to a healthy civil society featured by prevailing civic engagement and voluntary associations, not to mention democracy development as claimed in some classic work (e.g., de Tocqueville 2003; Putnam et al. 1994). Instead, high ideological indoctrination and strong institutional control may merely convert volunteering into a device of the state's ruling scheme.

However, it may be too early to declare the failure of the volunteering–civil society causality in China. So far as it creates institutional space for ordinary people to engage in public life even merely at the grassroots level and in a controlled manner, the government-controlled volunteering may still nurture community engagement, build social capital, develop public participation skills, and foster nonpolitical associations (Zhu 2008), which are critical for strengthening the incipient civil society in China. The actual effects and impacts of the volunteering policies call for further investigations.

**Acknowledgements** An earlier version of this article was presented at the Chinese Sociological Association Annual Meeting at Kunming in July 2019. I thank Mark Sidel, Qianjin Zhang, and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

#### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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