Abstract Reference Number: i03

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Title

Mobilizing Chinese Volunteers: The State, Community, and Civic Society

Abstract

The past 20 years have seen a striking rise of volunteer service in China. 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 volunteerism 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). The answer to the volunteering conundrum greatly concerns China’s civil society and democracy development and has drawn increasing scholarly attentions in recent years.

Extant literature suggests three mechanisms of mobilizing volunteers. First, the state mobilization approach (e.g. Xu, 2017) points out the state’s top-down mobilization and organization in volunteer service for pursuing “social governance innovation (shehui zhili chuangxin)” and “spiritual civilization building (jingshen wenming jianshe)”. Second, the community engagement approach (Liang, 2008; Xin, 2016) identifies the influence of the “building community (shequ jianshe)” campaign on the rise of volunteering, in which local residents’ participation is emphasized to improve the efficiency of service provision and grassroots democracy. Third, the civil society development approach (Zhu, 2008) emphasizes the rise of liberal individualism and civil rights awareness as the outgrowth of China’s accelerated modernization after its transformation into the market economy.

However, most volunteering studies rely primarily on qualitative methods such as case study, ethnography, and evaluation research to identify basic patterns, organizational mechanisms, and social impact in volunteer service. Other studies examine volunteering behavior in certain groups such as students, volunteer teachers, and sport games volunteers. These qualitative studies and
certain group studies provide important insights into the phenomenon of volunteering in China but the results cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Using the 2012 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) dataset, this study explores the factors associated with volunteering in China in a national sample of 5,819 Chinese residents aged 16 and above. Three approaches to volunteer recruitment are explored: state-individual connection, self-community relationship, and public-political participation. It finds that pro-volunteer legislation, political identity, and government-affiliated employment all contribute to volunteer service; generative concern, neighborhood cohesion, and felt social status are all positively associated with volunteer service; and association membership, charitable giving, voting in neighborhood election, and political demonstration participation are also positively associated with volunteering. The findings corroborate the three mechanisms of recruiting volunteers as suggested in extant literature: state mobilization through pro-volunteer legislation, the CCP-related system, and state-affiliated employment, the building community campaign since the early 2000s that fosters community-bound resident participation, and civil society development that fosters prosocial values and engagement in social issues for public interests.

**Keyword**