



Youth Volunteering in China: To What End?

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In the wake of the 1989 protest movements, the Chinese state [fixed upon volunteering](#) as a way to help ameliorate social tensions and address new social needs brought about by economic reform and restructuring. Almost 30 years later, tourists in Beijing's famed Wangfujing shopping area could be forgiven for assuming that China's capital is full of selfless and celebrated volunteers. Strolling along the pedestrian mall, one might be greeted with photographs of high-school students, police officers, middle-aged women, and university students depicted in acts of service like cutting hair and feeding sweet tapioca balls to elderly shut-ins and administering health exams in elementary schools. Captions like "Caring for Others" serve as both exhortations to ideal behaviour and explanations of the photos on display. In Beijing and other Chinese cities, banners strung across pedestrian bridges encourage gridlocked drivers to "Learn from Lei Feng, Contribute to Others, and Improve Yourself".

For sociologists, volunteering is typically seen as beneficial for individuals – through increased life-satisfaction and higher self-efficacy, for example – and also for society more broadly. Working with others towards common goals as volunteers can bring people from diverse backgrounds together, strengthening social trust and expanding participants' social networks. Such assessments are typically premised on an activity being truly voluntary and organised in a bottom-up fashion. In China, however, "government-style" volunteering is more the norm, with activities organised in a top-down fashion and supported by a variety of inducements.

Young people in particular are incentivised to join volunteer activities that the state deems useful and desirable. The Beijing branch of the Communist Youth League has in recent years adopted "making volunteer service go into everyday life" and "promoting volunteer service" as [key parts](#) of its work plans. Nationally, government agencies give preference to job seekers with good volunteer records. 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.

Over the past two decades many cities around China have seen explosive growth in government-organised volunteer associations. Some of these are led by the local state, while others are promoted by the Communist Youth League. Events like the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and the upcoming 2022 Winter Olympics allow 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 – organised 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 on the part of young volunteers.

University students are often a key target of such state-led programs. To understand better how young people experience volunteering, in [a recent project](#) I interviewed dozens of university students and recent graduates, all participants in one of two youth-based groups I’ve followed since 2005. With only a handful of paid staff and a shoestring budget, both groups are almost entirely volunteer-organised and led, one focusing on leprosy-affected rural villages and the other on educational enhancement for rural children. Many of their volunteers had also joined “official” student clubs approved by campus authorities and supported by university resources.

Universities often incentivise participating in official student clubs, giving student volunteers “points” that qualify them for scholarships. For the more strategically ambitious, serving in official club leadership positions also brings opportunities to build personal relations with supervising professors, the school’s party leaders, and administrators, as well as improving students’ job prospects. Yet people with experiences in both on- and off-campus groups frequently described official club activities as “formalistic” and meaningless exercises in following top-down orders and meeting the expectations of university authorities. One student who had taken part in several such activities described the emptiness of such gestures:

For example... in [our province] we have a Science Centre. [As members of an official student organisation] we also recruited volunteers for them. Those were all government-style volunteers. They all gave stipends and provided meals, etc... That style of volunteering, that style is one in which those above (*shangmian*) 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.

Many volunteers described such formalism (形式主义 *xingshi zhuyi*) as doing things for show, without real substance or meaning. Volunteering in official organizations left them feeling unsatisfied and disconnected from other participants, especially when compared to their own bottom-up groups. As one person explained:

Some schools organise “up to the mountains, down to the countryside” (上山下乡 *shangshan xiexiang*) activities, but in my understanding sixty to eighty 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.

Volunteers also 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 organisation:

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... 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 many, 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. Such 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 organisations, 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 organisations is weaker. It's not like just because you're interacting with someone closely you develop the kind of trust you have with friends...

In contrast, volunteering with the bottom-up groups they themselves lead was seen as producing a much more human experience. Meaningful volunteering, in these groups, meant experiencing and investing heavily in nurturing emotional ties (感情 *ganqing*) 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 emphasises interpersonal interactions... I think that in our activities we create a truly warm atmosphere compared to typical university student organisations.

Young Chinese volunteers like these are keen to connect emotionally with others, to engage in activities that provide a sense of common purpose and belonging, and to contribute to something beyond simply their own individual benefit.

On the surface, China's official embrace of volunteering may seem like a smart move – it mobilises young people full of enthusiasm and compassion, funnelling their energies toward generally legitimate state goals. But “government-style” volunteering is unlikely to fulfil a desire for meaningful social engagement or to build the sorts of social capital and social trust that inhere in self-directed volunteering. Indeed, “compulsory” volunteering can [produce cynicism and drive potential volunteers away](#). Ultimately, although the government remains wary of groups organised outside its direct control, if it doesn't grant more political space to voluntary associations, China is unlikely to reap the broader social benefits that true volunteering can produce.

A more detailed treatment of the issues presented here appears in [China Information](#).