

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building State-controlled Volunteering in China

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Abstract

The dominant role of the authoritarian state in Chinese volunteerism has been noted but little examined in the scholarly literature. This study illuminates the ways in which the Chinese state controls and administers volunteerism and volunteering through a detailed analysis of the governance of volunteering in Beijing. Drawing on participant observation, interviews and archival research, we analyse how Beijing administers volunteering and its structures through the work of its administrative authority for managing volunteering in regulation and public policy, management structure, resources, internal operations, monitoring and evaluation. We argue that Beijing has built a comprehensive apparatus to manage and control volunteering through a Party- and state-controlled, multi-layered and centralized management structure. However, this state corporatist structure carries within it the seeds for over-formal controls and conflicts between official, professional service providers and the increasing number of volunteers throughout Chinese society.

摘要

现有文献已经注意到威权型国家在中国志愿服务发展中的主导作用，但是尚未深入分析。本研究通过对中国首都北京的志愿服务治理的详细分析，阐明了国家控制和管理志愿服务的方式。通过参与式观察、访谈和档案研究，我们分析了北京的党组织和政府如何运用国家权力在法规和公共政策、管理结构、资源、内部运作以及监测和评估方面来管理志愿服务及其结构。我们认为，北京通过一个由党和国家控制的、多层次的、集中的管理结构，建立起了一个综合的志愿服务管理和控制体系。然而，这种国家法团主义的结构中孕育着过多控制的种子，以及官方和专业服务提供者与中国社会越来越多的志愿者之间的角色矛盾。

Keywords: civil society; state corporatism; volunteer management; volunteering policy

关键词: 公民社会; 国家法团主义; 志愿者管理; 志愿服务政策

Over the past three decades, China has witnessed a phenomenal growth in volunteering. The first registered volunteer organization was established only in 1990;¹ in 2021, however, the number of volunteers had reached 217 million, accounting for 15.4 per cent of the total population in China.² For social scientists, such a dramatic change raises the question of how volunteering has become so popular in an authoritarian state where voluntary associations themselves are tightly restricted.

In addition to factors such as the rise of individualism and the growing non-profit sector, some studies of China have identified the state itself as a critical factor in fostering volunteerism.³ For

1 Luova 2011.

2 Zhang, Yi, and Tian 2022.

3 Hu 2020; Luova 2011; Wei 2010.

example, in reviewing legislation and public policies related to volunteering, Ming Hu concludes 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.”⁴ In fact, the central Party and state have issued a significant number of legislative and public policy documents to manage as well as promote volunteerism since the early 2000s. A recent policy initiative has been the nationwide campaign on “Volunteering for practising civility” (*wenming shijian zhiyuan fuwu* 文明实践志愿服务) that started in 2018 and has already expanded to 500 of the nearly 3,000 county-level jurisdictions in China.⁵ In each target region, a centralized, state-managed structure has been established to coordinate all local volunteering and volunteer organizations. The campaign is being directed by the Party’s Propaganda Department, which plays a vital role in ideological matters.

While most studies of volunteering and volunteerism in China have focused primarily on specific volunteer programmes and organizations or public policy analysis, few have examined how the state exactly administers volunteering through a systematic, structural and institutional lens. Unveiling the Chinese state’s administrative system for managing volunteering not only helps to illuminate the seeming conundrum of rapidly rising Chinese volunteerism in the past several decades but also sheds light on international comparative studies on government intervention in volunteering, enriching the somewhat scarce literature on this topic.⁶

Along with previous studies of volunteering in authoritarian states, this study seeks to expose the state corporatist structure that the state has built to manage volunteering activities and organizations in China, where civil society is tightly constrained while volunteerism has been significantly promoted. By combining participant observation, interviews and archival research methods, this study examines how China’s capital, Beijing, administers and manages volunteering in Beijing. We find that the Chinese Party and state – in our study, the authorities in Beijing – have constructed a state corporatist regime to manage volunteer affairs in Beijing. Featuring direct state management in a multilayered and centralized administrative system, the resulting state-controlled volunteerism has become an essential means for public service delivery and an integral part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state’s social policy strategy.

Government and Volunteering

Volunteering has been viewed as “a panacea for whatever society’s current ills happen to be.”⁷ In the past several decades, many governments have significantly enhanced their interventions in volunteering matters and expanded on the benefits they expect from volunteering and the voluntary sector.⁸ However, how governments intervene in volunteering varies significantly. Helmut Anheier and Lester Salamon, in their 1999 cross-national study of volunteering, summarized four models of the state–voluntary sector relationship: liberal, social democratic, corporatist and statist.⁹ Volunteering policies and institutions vary significantly in different models. Specifically, in the social democratic model, the state leads the social welfare role, leaving room for the voluntary sector to engage in advocacy and personal expression. Take Sweden, for example, where the voluntary sector’s autonomy is seen as a priority.¹⁰ The liberal model seeks to curb the extension of government provision of social welfare and displays a preference for the provision of social services by non-profit organizations instead. For example, the United Kingdom has developed special volunteering institutions and

4 Hu 2020, 1375.

5 CCSCC 2019.

6 Anheier and Salamon 1999; GHK 2010; Rochester et al. 2010.

7 Sheard 1995, 116.

8 Avenell 2010; GHK 2010; Rochester et al. 2010.

9 Anheier and Salamon 1999.

10 GHK 2010.

programmes to support volunteer services while making volunteering legislation implicit in other laws.¹¹ Volunteering in the corporatist model tends to be an accessory to government-dominated social welfare provision, as exemplified in Germany where the state has promulgated special legislation on voluntary services and established state-managed volunteering programmes by working closely with voluntary organizations.¹² Finally, volunteering in the statist model is often restrained or moulded by a strong state to pursue state goals. For example, the Japanese government conceptualizes Japanese volunteerism, establishes government-directed volunteer organizations and programmes, and shapes volunteering to serve government goals directly.¹³

Debbie Haski-Leventhal and colleagues argue that democratic governments support volunteering with four major motivations: volunteering makes social services more affordable or improves the quality of service delivery; volunteering serves to enhance social capital and social inclusion; volunteering improves volunteers' quality of life and career possibilities; and volunteering contributes to the development of democracy and citizen participation in local governance.¹⁴ Nevertheless, government intervention in volunteering may risk damaging volunteerism. Peter Frumkin claims, for example, that "in its efforts to place volunteers into nationally subsidized programs, government may well risk subverting part of the fragile voluntary impulse it seeks to foster."¹⁵

Moreover, government-backed volunteerism may serve as "the ideology of the big business and politicians promoting the minimalist social welfare state" and as a social control instrument that "makes social problems an individual problem, thus depoliticizing the public."¹⁶ Compared to democratic states, authoritarian states may even coerce citizens to perform ostensibly voluntary work in order to achieve state goals and to strengthen an ideology of collectivistic social control.¹⁷ In the Soviet Union, such coerced "voluntary work" resulted in low volunteering rates long after the Soviet regime collapsed.¹⁸

Following Anheier and Salamon's model, the state-volunteering relationship in China may be labelled as corporatist or statist. In fact, the concept of state corporatism has been widely used to describe how the state manages its relations with a great variety of voluntary and non-profit organizations.¹⁹ It can be broadly defined as an arrangement of "organizing society into industrial and professional 'corporations' with the expressed intention for the latter to be subordinated to the state," in which the associations serve as vehicles for political representation and control.²⁰ State corporatism has been much corroborated in previous studies on the Chinese government's relations with business associations, industrial and occupational associations, charitable federations, and non-profit organizations in labour rights, environment, community development and other areas.²¹

Generally, the authors argue that the state incorporates these kinds of organizations into a state-controlled arrangement and manipulates them to serve state goals. But whether the paradigm applies to the volunteering field remains unclear in the extant literature. Given that there are still heated debates on the scope and accuracy of state corporatism in the analysis of the highly heterogeneous Chinese non-profit sector,²² and that volunteering constitutes a unique non-profit sphere, it deserves looking at with fresh eyes to explore how the authoritarian state handles volunteering organizations and issues in practice and what results these policies may bring.

11 Ibid.; Rochester et al. 2010.

12 Haß and Serrano-Velarde 2015.

13 Avenell 2010.

14 Haski-Leventhal, Meijs and Hustinx 2010.

15 Frumkin 2005, 51.

16 Petras 1997, 1587.

17 Juknevičius and Savicka 2003.

18 Ibid.

19 Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Spires 2018.

20 Ho 2016, 1. Also see Schmitter 1974.

21 Examples include Unger 1996; Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Chan and Lai 2018.

22 Unger 1996; Hsu and Hasmath 2014.

Volunteering and the Government in China: Past and Present

After its establishment in 1949, the People's Republic of China, led by the CCP, widely deployed obligated voluntary labour (*yiwu laodong* 义务劳动) by mobilizing citizens to work in public works projects and public/community services. Such labour in reality was compulsory.²³ In order to ease people's grievances about *yiwu laodong*, the state conducted ideological campaigns to promote voluntary labour. The most prominent of these was the "Learn from Lei Feng" (*xue Lei Feng* 学雷锋) mobilizational campaign that began in 1963.²⁴ Lei Feng was an army soldier and Party member who was widely propagandized as a Marxist moral model. Party members and other citizens were encouraged to learn from him about being ultimately loyal to the Party, always doing good and working hard.²⁵ The moral and political elements of the Lei Feng campaigns have since been incorporated into the push for modern, state-dominated volunteerism.

The founding of the Shenzhen Volunteer Association in 1990 marked the start of a new stage in volunteerism in China. Unlike previous forms of voluntary work, beginning in the 1990s Chinese citizens were able to contribute their labour of their own volition and largely without state coercion, thanks to the establishment of a relatively free labour market during China's economic reform. The Communist Youth League (*Gongqingtuan* 共青团, CYL hereafter), the Party's youth wing, enthusiastically welcomed such social service innovation and launched its China Youth Volunteers (*Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe* 中国青年志愿者) programme in 1993 alongside a series of other volunteering programmes and organizations.²⁶ Other organizations such as the Chinese Women's Federation and some early non-profit organizations also began to organize volunteers. But modern volunteerism and volunteering in China really took off in 2008, when millions of Chinese citizens volunteered to assist with relief in the wake of the massive Sichuan Wenchuan earthquake and during the Beijing Olympic Games.²⁷

The Chinese Party and state have welcomed the rise of modern volunteerism while seeking to play the dominant role in organizing volunteer services and shaping its dynamics for state goals. A few years after the early pioneering volunteer programmes, the CYL Central Committee created the first national volunteer services policy, the 2002 "Rules for registering and managing youth volunteers in China" (*Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe zhuce guanli banfa* 中国青年志愿者注册管理办法).²⁸ In the past 20 years, state interventions in volunteering have multiplied rapidly.²⁹ By 2020, the state had developed "a comprehensive system to administer volunteer services, which comprises an integrated leadership structure, objectives setting, resource provision, operations management, and evaluation mechanisms."³⁰ The purposes of this extensive policymaking have been to "help build ... the state's ideological hegemony, enhance innovative social management, and strengthen Party building."³¹

Despite strong policies and programmes on volunteering at the national level, implementation still depends on subnational provinces, cities and localities in China, as suggested in local state corporatism theory.³² A few studies have explored how the state manages volunteer affairs at the local level or through special programmes. Xiaohong Zhang and colleagues have summarized the volunteer services management systems in some large cities and provinces in history through major

23 Luo 2006; Lü 2013.

24 Li 2003.

25 Palmer and Ning 2020.

26 Lu 2017; Wei 2013.

27 Wei 2013.

28 General Office of CYL Central Committee 2002.

29 Hu 2020; Lu 2017.

30 Hu 2020, 4.

31 Ibid., 7.

32 Hsu and Hasmath 2014.

programmes, organizational and leadership structures, and supporting mechanisms.³³ Na Wei, Wei Shen and colleagues have respectively analysed how local governments organized and managed volunteering during the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2016 G20 Summit in Hangzhou.³⁴ Changkun Cai and Yaoqi Shen have discussed how a township government adapted its management of a volunteers' association to suit changing government goals.³⁵

This study takes a different approach. It systemically explores how the state-managed volunteer services agency actually operates in contemporary China and fulfils Party and state political mandates to encourage volunteering while controlling its reach and operations by looking at that agency's work in China's capital, Beijing.

Research Site and Methods

Beijing has been at the fore of modern volunteerism in China. In 1993, the Beijing CYL established the Beijing Volunteer Association, one of the earliest urban volunteer associations in the country, to manage the planning, instruction, organization and coordination of volunteering in Beijing. Many grassroots volunteer organizations emerged in the following years.

In 2001, after Beijing won the bid to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, the Beijing government expanded the Beijing Volunteer Association and other groups to support and coordinate the major volunteering ramp-up for the Olympics. This structure for coordination and support was viewed as a significant success after more than 1.7 million volunteers served at the Beijing Olympics.³⁶ After the Olympics, the Beijing government decided to further institutionalize an administrative structure for coordinating volunteering by upgrading the Beijing Volunteer Association to cover all types of organizations and individuals interested in volunteering. Thus, the Beijing Volunteer Services Federation (*Beijingshi zhiyuan fuwu lianhehui* 北京市志愿服务联合会, BVSF hereafter) was established in 2009 and has remained the hub of volunteer services in Beijing. By the end of 2020, the BVSF coordinated more than 78,000 volunteer groups and 4.42 million registered volunteers throughout the capital region.³⁷

We have selected Beijing as the case study of the administration of volunteering at the Chinese major urban level for two reasons. First, as China's capital, Beijing has been the key socio-political site and a barometer for the shifting, and in recent years tightening, relationship between the state and volunteering and the voluntary sector. Second, the administrative structure for the coordination and control of volunteering in Beijing has grown significantly and robustly and is generally typical of the condition of state-led volunteering in contemporary China, although the level of control and constraint appears to be less in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Chengdu and some other jurisdictions.³⁸

Three methods were used to collect data. First, two of us conducted six months of participant observation at the BVSF in 2016. As short-term programme officers, we observed the BVSF's daily operations, especially how the organization worked with the higher Party and governmental authorities, member organizations from the public, private and voluntary sectors, and subordinate agencies. In addition, we participated in managing a specific campaign aimed at promoting elderly-care volunteering in Beijing, which enabled us to learn how the administrative structure actually manages volunteering in a specific case.

Second, we conducted interviews with ten former and current officers from state agencies in charge of the management of volunteering at municipal, district and subdistrict levels in Beijing,

33 Zhang, Xiaohong, Guo and Li 2011.

34 Shen, Lin and Zhao 2017; Wei 2010.

35 Cai and Shen 2020.

36 Wei 2010.

37 "Beijing zhuce zhiyuanzhe da 438.3 wanren" (The number of registered volunteers in Beijing reached 4.383 million). *Beijing News*, 6 December 2020, <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2020/12-06/9355310.shtml>. Accessed 26 April 2020.

38 Zhang, Xiaohong, Guo and Li 2011.

asking these interviewees to describe how they managed volunteering within their jurisdictions. We also interviewed 22 volunteer organization leaders and long-term volunteers who described how they worked with state agencies and other stakeholders.

Third, we analysed documentary data on the coordination and control of volunteering from a variety of sources, including legal and policy documents, government reports, meeting notes, project pamphlets, portal sites and news coverage.

In what follows, we describe how the local state administered volunteering and volunteerism in Beijing in terms of public policy environment, goals and management structure, resources, operations and evaluation, using an organizational analysis framework.³⁹

The Regulatory and Public Policy Frameworks for Coordination and Control of Volunteering in Beijing

Beijing has taken a lead in regulatory and policy frameworks for the coordination and control of volunteering and volunteer organizations, in significant measure because of the major efforts to organize volunteering at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and then to consolidate volunteering structures after the Olympics. Three major local regulatory and policy documents have been crucial for shaping volunteering in Beijing.

In 2007, the Beijing Municipal People's Congress adopted the "Ordinance on the promotion of volunteer services" (*zhiyuan fuwu cujin tiaoli* 志愿服务促进条例) to regulate and coordinate volunteering and volunteer organizations, protect the rights of volunteers, and support the development of volunteer services.⁴⁰ The 2007 Ordinance provided the legal basis for managing volunteering for the 2008 Olympics, specifying the rules on registration and recruitment of volunteers, the permissible scope of volunteer activities, and volunteers' rights and responsibilities. Even more important, the Ordinance specified for the first time that governments of all levels in Beijing should include volunteering in their yearly social and economic development plans. This meant that coordinating and advancing volunteer services were officially part of the state's governing agenda. Government departments handling civil affairs, finance, human resources, education and other areas were clearly required to plan for, coordinate and support volunteering in their domains. The Ordinance established an early institutional basis for Beijing to build a state-led, multilevel and cross-sectoral volunteer coordination and management system for China's capital.

The next regulatory and policy step in building a comprehensive, multilevel and cross-sectoral management structure to regulate and coordinate volunteering in Beijing came a year after the massive and successful volunteer effort for the 2008 Olympic Games. In 2009, Beijing's Party Committee and the Beijing Municipal Government jointly released the "Opinions on strengthening and improving volunteer work" (*Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin zhiyuanzhe gongzuo de yijian* 关于进一步加强和改进志愿者工作的意见) as part of the process of preserving and expanding the administrative structure for coordinating and managing volunteering in Beijing.⁴¹ The 2009 Opinions sought to strengthen volunteer mobilization and the state's direct management of volunteering as well as develop a comprehensive and integrated institutional system for advancing state-led volunteer management.

Although issued as "opinions," this regulatory document sought to direct the purposes of volunteer services, the principles for advancing volunteerism, leadership and management in volunteer organizations, the management of volunteers, and mechanisms for developing volunteer organizations, priority domains in volunteering and supportive measures. The primary principle of the 2009 Opinions was that important volunteering work should be carried out under the leadership of state agencies. The 2009 Opinions declared the BVSF to be the overall coordination and control body for

39 Rainey 2009.

40 Beijing Municipal People's Congress 2007.

41 CCP Beijing Committee and Beijing Municipal Government 2009.

volunteering services and volunteering management in Beijing on behalf of the municipal authorities.

Five years later, after significant development of the structure for coordinating and administering volunteering in Beijing, six Party-led departments, including the BVSF, jointly released the “Opinions on engaging Communist Party and Youth League members in active learning from Lei Feng” (*Guanyu zuzhi quanshi gongchangdangyuan, gongqingtuanyuan jiji canjia xue Lei Feng zhiyuan fuwu huodong shishi yijian* 关于组织全市共产党员、共青团员积极参加学雷锋志愿服务活动实施意见) in 2014. This political document sought to integrate modern volunteering with the ideological and mobilizational “Learn from Lei Feng” practices of the past and integrate volunteering with Party policy. It called upon Party and CYL members to incorporate volunteer services into Learn from Lei Feng practices by participating in volunteer activities and specified the guidelines, project categories and organizational approaches for their participation.⁴² Given the predominant role of the Party and the CYL in the governance and administration of Beijing, the 2014 Opinions helped to shape the ideological basis and mobilizational mechanisms for volunteer services in the years after.

Supplemented by other national and municipal policies, these major local regulatory and policy frameworks set the basis for volunteering and volunteer management in Beijing, frameworks which feature state coordination and mobilization, centralized leadership, the persistence of some ideology and, above all, volunteers and volunteer organizations serving state goals.

The Coordination and Control of Volunteering in Beijing: Goals and Management Structure

The administrative structure for the control and management of volunteering in Beijing serves three general goals: to improve the provision of social services; to promote ideological education and citizen engagement under Party and state management; and to strengthen the leadership of the Party by keeping close contact with the masses and developing the Party’s grassroots organizations.⁴³

The administrative structure for volunteering in Beijing has specific objectives concerning volunteer rates and the development of volunteering infrastructure. For example, according to the 2009 Opinions, the objectives were to:

establish a large-scale, all-encompassing, well-organized, effective and orderly volunteer population ... in order to meet the needs of regular volunteer services and volunteer services for important events and emergency response on a reliable basis; enhance the volunteering rate to 20 per cent and higher, with the number of registered volunteers at no less than two million, and per capita volunteer hours at more than 50 per year, through three to five years of efforts; attain regular reserves of volunteer services, standardized management, regular service projects, brand name building, workflow development, information technology development, and public participation.⁴⁴

The authorities in Beijing have developed an integrated Party and state-led multi-layered and highly centralized management structure to pursue those goals and objectives. The management structure has three subsystems: leadership, coordination and volunteer organizations. The subsystems are integrated and structured at four levels – municipal, district, subdistrict and neighbourhood – in line with the hierarchy of urban government in China. Their relationship is presented in [Figure 1](#).

The leadership subsystem at the municipal level primarily comprises three state agencies: the CCP Capital Committee on Spiritual Civilization Construction (*Shoudu jingshen wenming jianshe*

42 Organization Department of CCP Beijing Committee et al. 2014.

43 CCP Beijing Committee and Beijing Municipal Government 2009; Organization Department of CCP Beijing Committee et al. 2014. See also Hu 2020.

44 CCP Beijing Committee and Beijing Municipal Government 2009.

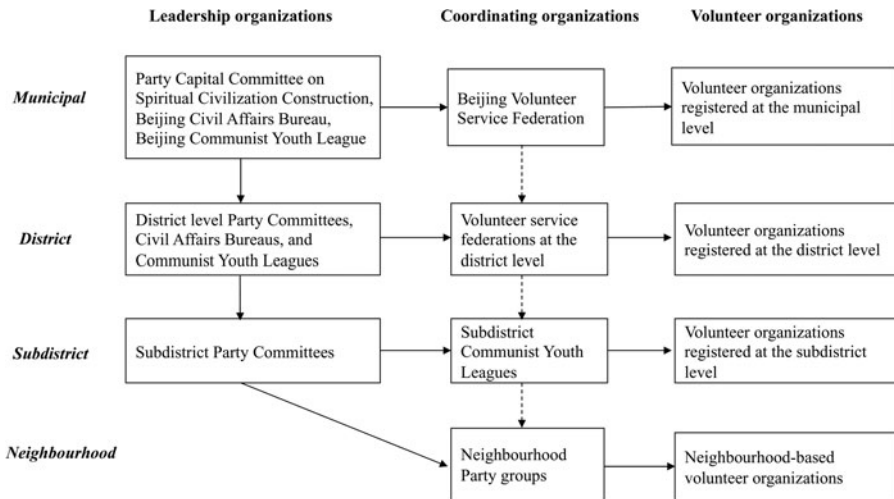


Figure 1: The Management of Volunteering in Beijing

weiyuanhui 首都精神文明建设委员会, CCSCC hereafter), the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau (*Beijingshi minzhengju* 北京市民政局) and the Beijing CYL. The CCSCC works under the Beijing Party Committee. It acts as the principal head of the volunteering management system, leading all relevant organizations and making the most important decisions.⁴⁵ The Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau is primarily responsible for designing and drafting related regulations and policies and manages the registration and evaluation of volunteer-involving organizations. The Beijing CYL serves as the implementation agency in volunteer management and is tasked with planning volunteer services, mobilizing resources and supervising volunteer projects and organizations.

In addition to these three core institutions, other state agencies may also participate in leading volunteer affairs in their particular fields. For example, the Beijing Transportation Bureau (*Beijingshi jiaotongju* 北京市交通局) leads traffic management volunteers, and the Capital Committee on Integrated Social Management (*Shoudu zongzhiwei* 首都综治委) manages neighbourhood safety volunteers. People’s organizations (*renmin tuanti* 人民团体) such as the Beijing Municipal Trade Union (*Beijingshi zong gonghui* 北京市总工会) and the Beijing Municipal Women’s Federation (*Beijingshi funü lianhehui* 北京市妇女联合会) manage volunteer affairs through their member organizations, which are embedded in all state-owned institutions and some private enterprises. The leadership structure at the municipal level is closely duplicated at the district and subdistrict levels, as presented in Figure 1, and lower levels work under the leadership of higher levels, in line with China’s political centralization.

The coordination subsystem at the municipal level has a core organization, the BVSF. Although a non-profit organization registered with the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau, it is deeply interwoven with the state apparatus. According to its bylaws, the BVSF is led in policy terms by an assembly of institutional and individual members, which includes the CCSCC, the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau, the Beijing CYL, the Beijing Finance Bureau and others. The assembly selects the BVSF’s board of directors, which represents a wide range of Party and state organizations and also includes some individual board members from non-profit organizations, companies and educational institutions that welcome volunteers. Besides the board of directors, a special board of supervisors, comprising seven supervisors from different Party and state agencies, was established to oversee the board of directors.

45 Beijing’s Municipal People’s Congress 2007.

Under the leadership of the boards, the Beijing Volunteer Services Guidance Centre (*Beijingshi zhiyuan fuwu zhidao zhongxin* 北京市志愿服务指导中心) serves as the BVSF's secretariat and is in charge of its everyday operations. The Guidance Centre is also affiliated with the Beijing CYL as part of its executive function in managing volunteering. The Guidance Centre, in turn, has offices for member services, programme development, international development, research and training, information technology and publicity.

In each of Beijing's 17 urban and rural districts, a similarly structured but less comprehensive volunteer services federation coordinates volunteer affairs within each respective district. At the sub-district level, most authorities appoint one or more officers, usually from the subdistrict-level CYL, to administer local volunteer affairs rather than establish a special institution like the BVSF. At the neighbourhood level, neighbourhood Party committees coordinate neighbourhood-based volunteer groups, with guidance from Party and CYL organizations at the subdistrict level.

In this highly integrated structure led by Party and state agencies, lower-level coordinating groups are supervised by higher-level coordinating organizations. For example, when the BVSF initiated an elderly-care service campaign across the city, the city-wide federation developed the overall plan for the campaign and distributed it to the 17 district-level volunteer services federations. The district federations then made specific arrangements based on the plan and assigned tasks to the subdistrict-level coordinating organizations. At the same government level, the leadership structure has more influence on the volunteer coordinating organization's operations: the district-level volunteer services federations report first to district Party and state authorities, not to the BVSF. This complies with the regulations that prohibit vertical management (*chuishu guanli* 垂直管理) relations between two non-profit organizations. A non-profit organization must not establish subsidiary organizations at a lower-level jurisdiction.⁴⁶ These reporting relationships indicate the Party- and state-led hierarchical control structure for organizing volunteering in Beijing.

The volunteer organization subsystem consists of volunteers and volunteer organizations of different levels. All volunteers are encouraged to register at an official portal site run by the BVSF. The volunteer organizations should also register online with a volunteer services federation through the portal site. After registration by both sides, volunteers can select which volunteer organization they would like to apply to for volunteering.

Groups welcoming volunteers are managerially (but not legally) registered with the volunteer coordinating organizations of different levels and generally include volunteer groups established by public institutions (such as schools or hospitals), neighbourhood organizations (for example, neighbourhood residents' committees), non-profit organizations and enterprises. According to the organizer's political status in the government system and the volunteer group's size, volunteer groups are classified into four levels: municipal, district, subdistrict and neighbourhood. The volunteer groups of different levels are registered with and coordinated by the volunteering coordinating organization at the same level. Thus, the Beijing-wide volunteer services federation, the BVSF, registers and coordinates municipal volunteer groups, the district-level federations register and coordinate district volunteer groups, and so on, to the volunteer groups of lower levels.⁴⁷

This volunteer organization subsystem has recently been complicated by the provision of the 2017 Volunteer Services Ordinance. The 2017 Ordinance permitted non-profit organizations legally registered with the civil affairs authorities to manage volunteers and volunteer events without special permission from the volunteer services federations around China.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the authorized non-profit organizations are required to report their volunteer projects and information

46 General Office of CCP Central Committee and General Office of State Council 2016.

47 Not all the subdistricts and neighbourhoods have a volunteer services federation. The volunteer group can ask the federation at a higher level for support regarding registration and coordination.

48 Previous government policies covered only the CYL-affiliated volunteer groups and organizations, but not other social organizations, which managed volunteer projects with relative autonomy. The 2017 Volunteer Service Ordinance, for the first time, made stipulations for all types of volunteer organizations.

about their volunteers, such as background, training, service record, acknowledgements and punishments, to the volunteer services federations if they require acknowledgement and resources from the state. This is part of how they are coordinated and also monitored by the federations. Meanwhile, the federations continue to directly manage volunteer groups that are not legally registered as a social organization or which operate in a different form. In this sense, the 2017 Ordinance did not bring a major change to the structure of volunteering in Beijing. However, it did serve to unify social organizations' volunteering within the federation regime. Thus, the federations confirmed and strengthened their role as a peak organization in the volunteering domain.

The Structure of Political, Personnel and Financial Resources in Volunteering Management

The local Chinese state has provided significant political, personnel and financial resources to support the volunteer services federations of different levels. The political resources have already been partly discussed above. The 2009 Opinions clearly emphasized the prioritization of volunteerism in the Party and government agenda and assigned the volunteer services leadership within the Party and state system. The Opinions required that local Party and state agencies support volunteer services in their fields of responsibility and that the BVSF should serve as an overall hub organization to support volunteer services and link "all departments, all sectors, [and] all industries" in Beijing.⁴⁹ Thus, the Opinions provided a strong endorsement of the BVSF's political status within the state system while also confirming the integration of volunteering management under direct Party and state leadership.

This is mirrored in the structure of the BVSF. Many of the members of the assembly and board of directors are from powerful Party and state agencies. The board chair is generally one of the Beijing Communist Party Committee senior members, and deputy chairs are also senior officials from municipal Party and state agencies. The BVSF's secretary-general – the key executive position – is a senior Beijing CYL official.⁵⁰ Despite its legal status as a social organization, such close ties with political authority have empowered the BVSF to coordinate with Party and state institutions and other organizations in China's state-dominated, highly centralized political system while also integrating volunteering into that centralized structure.

The BVSF also receives personnel support from the local government. As noted above, the BVSF's secretariat, the Guidance Centre, is a state agency affiliated with the Beijing CYL. In 2020, it had about 50 staff members, including 34 official government employees (*bianzhi* 编制) and other government employees and long-term volunteers. At the district and subdistrict levels, local authorities, usually the local CYL organizations, assign officials to operate the coordinating organizations within their jurisdictions, although the staff size varies and usually is smaller than that in the citywide federation. In addition to the coordinating organizations, many state agencies with established volunteer organizations also assign officers (usually from their CYL offices) to manage the volunteers and communicate with the coordinating organizations.

The volunteer services federations are also fully supported by public finances. The 2007 Ordinance required that "the municipal and district or county governments should include volunteering in their economic and social development plans, fund volunteering, and instruct and promote volunteerism."⁵¹ In implementing the Ordinance, the Beijing Municipal Government established a special fund and annually allocated 10 million yuan (about US\$1.4 million) for the BVSF's operations. District governments similarly provided funds for volunteerism and volunteer management. In 2016, for example, the Xicheng District Government spent 8.6 million yuan on

49 CCP Beijing Committee and Beijing Municipal Government 2009.

50 For example, at the BVSF's 2020 congress, Du Feijin, head of the Publicity Department of the CCP Beijing Committee, was appointed as chair, and Li Jian, associate director of the CYL Beijing Committee, was appointed as secretary-general.

51 Beijing Municipal People's Congress 2007.

supporting volunteering and volunteer management.⁵² In addition to this regular support, local levels of the Beijing Municipal Government also established special funds to support special volunteering projects. The best example of this is, of course, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, for which the Beijing authorities spent 171 million yuan (then about US\$25.6 million) on organizing volunteering efforts.⁵³

The Scope of Coordination through the Volunteer Services Federations

Given that the Party and state-led structure for volunteering involves many sectors and areas, has multiple administration levels and comprises numerous member organizations, its operations are highly complex and broad. Its work includes the promotion of volunteerism, mobilizing volunteers, cross-organizational coordination, direct management of major volunteer projects, monitoring and evaluation of volunteer services and external communications.

Most of these functions illustrate and typify the close relationship between Party and state priorities and the volunteer services federations' work. For example, in its promotion of volunteerism, the BVSF coordinates with state agencies to incorporate volunteer services into the provision of public goods and social management. In Beijing's 13th Five Year Plan on Aging and Elderly Care (*Beijingshi shisanwu shiqi laoling shiye fazhan guihua* 北京市“十三五”时期老龄事业发展规划), elderly care volunteers were listed as an essential social force to staff the elderly care service system.⁵⁴ The same kinds of coordination have occurred in environmental protection and support for the disabled, linking Party and state priorities to volunteering work.⁵⁵ The federations also promote volunteering by coordinating work with the media on volunteering activities. One interviewee told us:

Promoting volunteer services is an important project on the district government's agenda ... For example, we set up a "Volunteering Day" for Party and CYL members and other citizens in July when the district CYL committee will release a policy document to call for volunteering. The document is co-signed by the district Party committee and government agencies. Imaginably, such promotional action is very effective.⁵⁶

The mobilization function in the volunteer services federations also links directly to broader political goals and institutional arrangements. The federations help to coordinate the volunteering by their organizational members and Party and CYL members, who are sometimes required to volunteer. In these ways, what appears to be a significant amount of Beijing's volunteer activity has been linked to the federations, which is a part of the goal of these institutional arrangements.⁵⁷ A subdistrict-level federation officer claimed:

We have a basic idea that the state should use volunteering as a primary instrument of social mobilization and an important tool for social management. Nowadays, our social mobilization capacity has declined and other mobilizational means no longer work well ... Surely, Chinese volunteering is state-led, which is determined by the nature of our society. Things will become messy if the state lets them loose.⁵⁸

52 Xicheng District Volunteer Services Federation 2018.

53 National Audit Office 2009.

54 Beijing Municipal Government 2016.

55 For example, in 2017, BVSF joined the CCP Societal Building Commission in launching a campaign to advocate volunteerism and for-public-interest action in "protecting our blue sky, clean water, and antiques, and serving our community and society." It also promoted volunteering for the disabled by releasing the "Opinions on further improving disability assistance volunteering" together with the Beijing Disabled Persons' Federation, a state-affiliated people's organization.

56 Interview with a district-level CYL official, Beijing, 11 August 2016.

57 Xicheng District Volunteer Services Federation 2018.

58 Interview with a subdistrict-level federation officer, Beijing, 2 November 2016.

The administration of volunteering by the federations also serves important coordinative functions. For example, the BVSF develops volunteering standards, practical guidance and public policy suggestions that public institutions and volunteer-welcoming organizations are expected to refer to and implement in their volunteer programmes.⁵⁹ In addition, the federations take the lead in fostering grassroots volunteer organizations by providing small grants, training, service materials and technical support.⁶⁰ Not all volunteering activities are welcomed by the Party and state, nevertheless, and this is where the federations play a role in limiting and prioritizing activities. Volunteering activities in the areas of social morals, poverty alleviation, community service and emergency response were the top priorities, according to the 2009 Opinions.⁶¹ Volunteering activities involving environmental justice, women's rights, labour rights and LGBT rights have been discouraged or even punished. For example, the CEO of a non-profit organization empowering women reported that the college student clubs they sponsored in around 100 colleges increasingly experienced stagnation or dissolution in recent years. Some student leaders were warned by college administrators to stop their on-campus projects.

On some important projects, including those of particular national or municipal importance, the volunteer services federations serve as the direct management authority for volunteering or else closely coordinate with the special groups formed to manage volunteering at those particularly large and/or sensitive events. The BVSF's direct predecessor, for example, was the designated organization responsible for the management of the 1.7 million volunteers for the 2008 Olympic Games. In some other large events, such as the 70th National Day celebrations in 2019 and the 2022 Winter Olympic Games, special commissions under the local state leadership were established to manage volunteer-related affairs linked to the volunteer services federations directly. In addition, the federations play a major role in volunteering for government policy promotion and emergency response. For example, in 2017 the BVSF mobilized 17,000 volunteers and 70,000 volunteer hours in support of the Beijing CYL's "five youth initiatives" (*wuda qingnian xingdong* 五大青年行动) environmental campaign on air pollution, water conservation, waste classification, environment-friendly transportation and neighbourhood environment.⁶² When the Covid-19 epidemic hit Beijing in 2020, the BVSF also mobilized volunteers to assist neighbourhoods with pandemic prevention and control.⁶³

Another core function of the federations has been monitoring and evaluating volunteer projects and groups, providing a key element in the state's monitoring, control and constraint of volunteerism. The federations accomplish this through gathering information on volunteering projects and groups via an internet portal, using a reward system to recognize volunteer organizations and individuals that the state models to others, and conducting performance evaluations of volunteering groups. For example, the Beijing Party and government organizes an annual ceremony to recognize "the 100 best volunteers, the 100 best volunteer groups, the 100 best volunteer services programmes, the 100 best volunteer-involving communities, and 100 best volunteer families," the selection of which are managed by the BVSF.⁶⁴

Does the State-controlled Volunteer Services Structure Work? Some Initial Observations

In terms of volunteer mobilization and organizing volunteer management, the control and coordination structure set up in Beijing has fulfilled its goals so far. From 2008 to 2020, the volunteer population in Beijing rose from 1.7 million to 4.42 million, an increase of 158 per cent. In 2020,

59 BVSF 2017.

60 Ibid.

61 CCP Beijing Committee and Beijing Municipal Government 2009.

62 BVSF 2017.

63 "Beijingshi zhiyuanfuwu lianhehui changyi: zhiyuanzhe youxu canyu yiqing fangkong" (Beijing Volunteer Services Federation calls for volunteers to help with the COVID-19 outbreak). *Beijing Daily*, 27 January 2020.

64 Publicity Department of CCP Beijing Committee 2019.

20.4 per cent of regular Beijing residents volunteered, meeting the objective set by the municipal government. Total volunteer hours also increased, reaching 380 million hours by December 2019.⁶⁵ In addition, the structure has fostered civic engagement – albeit coordinated and controlled – in the sense that it created space for the public to provide volunteering and social services with and for their fellow citizens.

Despite this structure's success in encouraging volunteering, meeting state goals for the volunteering process and promoting Party and state priorities, such robust control over volunteer services may risk damaging voluntariness in individuals' engagement and have a negative impact on the promotion of volunteering in the longer run. In some places, this is a problem of formalism. In some Beijing districts, for example, all Party and CYL members were required to register as volunteers,⁶⁶ which might result in compulsory and formalistic volunteering – people volunteering not out of their own free will but because it is required and, in turn, perhaps dampening volunteers' passion for good deeds.⁶⁷ Many public sector organizations are required to organize their staff to participate in volunteer activities on workdays. The boundaries between volunteer services and professional work sometimes become blurred as well, especially in public service workplaces.

With respect to internal governance, the state-led structure of managing volunteering and volunteerism was far from synchronous and monolithic. Regardless of the powerful (but symbolic) leadership subsystem, the volunteer services federations' execution instrument, the secretariats of different levels, remained marginalized inside the political regime and had difficulty in coordinating other powerful state agencies in volunteering projects and policies which reported primarily to the district- and lower-level Party and state. This inhibited the federations' mobilizing and coordinating capacity. In addition, cross-district difference in managing volunteering and volunteerism has existed in Beijing owing to geographic location, economic and cultural development, government capacity and other district-level factors.

It is also noteworthy that some non-profit organizations organized volunteer services but kept their distance from the state-led administrative structure. According to a former BVSF officer, rights-based non-profit organizations often kept a low profile to avoid partnering with state agencies and to reduce political risk. They developed an internal system for managing volunteer projects. Some other non-profit organizations stressed the value of autonomy. The leader of a volunteer-run library said: "We do not want to register our organization, which will hinder our organizational independence, not to mention the complicated registration procedures and managerial rules."⁶⁸ In addition, some non-profit organizations did not join the volunteer services federation system because of their different perception of volunteering and volunteer acknowledgement, despite their general admiration of the state-led structure in fostering and leading volunteer services. For example, the CEO of an environmental non-profit organization told us:

Our volunteers are hardly interested in government acknowledgement. They love nature, serve other people, and pursue their self-worth ... They do not think of themselves as volunteers. Rather, they will feel happy to be seen as a bird-viewing expert, or an amateur botanist, for instance.⁶⁹

Finally, some non-profit organizations chose to engage with the federations' volunteering management system in a limited and strategic way. For example, the leader of a non-profit organization serving domestic workers argued that:

65 "Beijing yi shiming zhuce 438.3 wan zhiyuanzhe leiji zhiyuanfuwu 3.8 yi xiaoshi" (Registered volunteers in Beijing reached 4.383 million and the total volunteer service hours reached 380 million hours). *China News*, 1 December 2019, <http://www.chinanews.com/m/sh/2019/12-01/9021926.shtml?f=qbapp>. Accessed 15 December 2019.

66 Xicheng District Volunteer Services Federation 2018.

67 Spies 2018.

68 Interview with the team leader of a volunteer-run library, Beijing, 10 November 2021.

69 Interview with the CEO of an environmental non-profit organization, Beijing, 5 November 2021.

Only a few volunteers need official certificates. We register with the BVSF and keep a record of their volunteer services on the BVSF's website. But we did not apply for the BVSF's volunteer project grants, nor participate in their contests that select and award "outstanding volunteers" or "outstanding projects." It was very time-consuming to prepare for these things (and not worthwhile).⁷⁰

Interestingly, we observed no cases in which the non-profit organizations working outside the state-led administrative structure for volunteering were punished because of their own volunteer management.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article seeks to explore how Party and state administer volunteering and volunteerism in contemporary China through a detailed examination of the Party and state-controlled volunteer services management apparatus in Beijing. The structure and work of the apparatus illustrate how China has incorporated volunteering into the Party and government's governance system and made it an integral part of Party and government affairs.⁷¹

Specifically, Beijing has established a Party and state-controlled, hierarchical and centralized system within the governance structure to coordinate and manage volunteering and serve Party and state goals. The volunteer services federations are fully incorporated into the Party and state structure through policy and regulation, the establishment of linked institutions at municipal and local levels, and state support through political, personnel and financial means. The federations pursue Party and state policies regarding volunteering, social service provision, ideological education and Party building when they aggregate and represent the interests of volunteers and volunteer organizations through mobilization, registration, training, funding and other member services. These institutional arrangements indicate a state corporatist pattern in the state–volunteering relationship in China.⁷²

However, it is noteworthy that a trend towards a more statist pattern in volunteering has recently emerged as Party and state coordination of volunteering has been enhanced through stronger linkages to the state apparatus, as demonstrated in the "Volunteering for practising civility" campaign. In this nationwide mobilizational campaign, the Party committee in each pilot county and district was required to serve as the "front line command," and their heads as volunteer captains, to lead nearly all-encompassing volunteering across different sectors.⁷³ In another case, the state mobilized and incorporated volunteers into the social stability task forces that were managed by state agencies to reinforce social control and co-opt voluntary associations.⁷⁴ The new trend warrants close observation in the years to come. By the beginning of 2023, the Party was taking further steps to strengthen its control of volunteering policy. In February 2023, it formed a new Social Affairs Department to coordinate and control policy on volunteering, social organizations and other aspects of civil affairs, citizens' complaints and approaches to government authorities, business associations and Party building in these areas.⁷⁵

It may take time to clearly observe the impact of the strong Party and state intervention on volunteer services development. For the United States, Peter Frumkin warned that "[b]y bringing government into the non-profit and voluntary sector, policymakers risked weakening the complex

70 Interview with the leader of a non-profit organization serving domestic workers, Beijing, 2 November 2021.

71 Hu 2020.

72 Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Luova 2011; Unger 1996.

73 CCSCC 2019.

74 Yang, Wang and Zhang 2022.

75 See the Party and State Institutional Reform Programme, adopted by the Second Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee, 28 February 2023, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2023-03/16/content_5747072.htm. The new Central Social Affairs Department is discussed at section 1(4).

altruistic motive that it was attempting to promote.⁷⁶ A different version of this problem has a long history in China, of which the rise of Party and state-controlled volunteer management structures such as volunteer services federations are perhaps only the most recent development. Although in different modes and in different times, they are linked to Party- and state-encouraged – and even mandated – volunteerism that reached its most authoritarian and mobilizational levels in the *yiwu laodong* campaigns in earlier decades. And yet the use of these structures is, in fact, different – less authoritarian, less directly mobilizational, but still quite coordinative and controlling, intended as much to prevent unauthorized volunteering, or volunteering for unauthorized purposes or for advocacy, as actually to stimulate volunteering.⁷⁷ Admittedly, a few non-profit organizations still found room to keep their distance from it.

This study enriches the insufficient literature on the relationship between the state and volunteering. Drawing on Anheier and Salamon's model, Chinese volunteering has recently shown the features of a state corporatist pattern.⁷⁸ Unlike the liberal or social democratic patterns, there is no strong working class or middle class in China that supposedly can inhibit excessive expansion of state power in the civil sphere. And unlike the statist pattern, the Party and state do face an incipient yet rapidly growing middle class that has emerged in China's marketization reform and has demanded more civic participation, an important arena of which is volunteering.⁷⁹

The Party and state have taken a state corporatist approach to address these new challenges by building a state-controlled federation system to channel the momentum of civic engagement and guide volunteering and volunteerism to serve social development, albeit on the Party and state's terms. This study corroborates the extant literature that takes a state corporatist perspective to investigate the state–non-profit sector relationship in certain fields in contemporary China, but brings a volunteering light into this picture.⁸⁰ Specifically, it disagrees with the civil society model and the societal corporatism model that stress the autonomy and proactive capacity of voluntary organizations in advancing democratic development.⁸¹ Nor does it readily align with the statist account of a state-subdued voluntary sector, given that the volunteer services federations played a substantial, albeit secondary, role in representing the interest of volunteers and volunteering organizations, as shown in the Beijing case.⁸² The findings reflect new features of volunteering and volunteerism in recent years. They also enrich our understanding of the global landscape of state–volunteering relations by showing how an authoritarian Party and state apparatus intervenes in and controls volunteering while also seeking to increase volunteering for Party and state purposes.

Future research will likely show continuing developments in how the Party and state manage volunteering and its structures in China. And future research may show growing or lessening heterogeneity in state-led and managed volunteering in other areas of China. Researchers for the major southern metropolis of Guangzhou, for example, have shown that the volunteer management structure there featured higher participation of non-state organizations and less centralization compared to Beijing.⁸³ Cross-regional comparative studies will help to deepen our understanding of the political dynamics and local circumstances that shape the state's administration of volunteering in China. Future research may also usefully track the effects and impact of Party and state-controlled volunteering on volunteers and volunteering organizations in key fields and in regions and localities across China, as we seek to analyse the changing roles of the Party and state in the development of civil society in China.

76 Frumkin 2005, 50–51.

77 Li 2003.

78 Anheier and Salamon 1999.

79 Lu 2017; Luova 2011; Palmer and Ning 2020.

80 Chan and Lai 2018; Hsu and Hasmath 2014.

81 Hsu and Hasmath 2014; Unger 1996.

82 Yang, Wang and Zhang 2022.

83 Zhang, Xiaohong, Guo and Li 2011.

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