



On the Origin and Development of Volunteerism in China

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Abstract: Voluntary service in modern sense was developed in China at the end of 19th century. Research under volunteerism flourished along with the development of voluntary service. By probing into the history of volunteerism in China, we can fully understand its development status in the society and find angles to analyze new problems and issues derived in its growth, we can come up with advices on how to promote and cultivate volunteerism and voluntary culture in the country.

Keywords: China; Volunteerism; Origin; Development status

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1 Introduction

Voluntary service under Chinese context in true sense is the localization of the imported product. To trace the source of Chinese volunteerism, some scholars refer to the religious origin of Western volunteerism, and believe that Chinese volunteerism originates from the Confucian benevolence thought; however, it is far away from the truth as we compare the two from different angles. Voluntary service in the West itself was conceived by religious charity, and it was seldom affected by external factors; in China, however, it was not directly bred by a Chinese folk charity

with Confucian benevolence. The main reason why voluntary service in China has developed rapidly in a short period of time is that it has been affected by the rush of voluntary service across the world. On the one hand, it stemmed from the cradle of traditional Chinese culture; on the other, the inherent spirit of volunteerism has a rich sense of the time and modernity, which is why some scholars nicknamed it as the country's "historic modern product". This feature of volunteerism fits well with the characteristics of college students as a young group. Voluntary service can realize the desire of college students to participate in social practice and achieve social recognition. The process of voluntary practice also promotes the construction of college students' socialist core values. It is therefore safe to say that voluntary service grows along with college students in China.

Some other scholars believe that there is no true source of volunteerism in traditional Chinese culture. They fail to realize that western voluntary spirit evolved from self-salvation religious charity, while Chinese volunteerism originated from the virtue ethics that emphasize self-cultivation. There is a sharp difference between the two.

The Confucian view of *benevolence* (Ren) (A. F. Wright, 1960) and the Mohist view of *universal love* (Jian Ai) (Carine, 2014) are the most solid foundations on which the volunteer spirit can be generated. The two views of *benevolence* and *universal love* have in common that both advocate love for others and

treat others as oneself, which is the direct source of the altruistic spirit of humanity in the volunteerism. *Benevolence* is the core of Confucianism. Confucius believes that the practice of *benevolence* is the basic requirement of personal moral cultivation (Omar eds., 2015). People should practice *benevolence* throughout their lives till one's death. When asking how one should define *benevolence* by Fan Chi, Confucius simply replied: "to love others". This shows that Confucianism's *benevolence* means "to love others", and people must learn to love others if they want to be benevolent. At the same time, Confucian benevolence means love of different levels, which is reflected in the benevolence of those from near to far. The first level is filial piety (Omar eds., 2015). In detail: *A young man, said the Master, should be filial at home and respectful abroad, cautious and trustworthy, affectionate towards all and intimate with the good. If he has time to spare when his duties are done, he may use it to learn arts.* Confucius believes that everyone should love his parents and brothers, which is what makes us human. *If this is not possible, what else can one do?* The two lines above clearly manifest that Confucian benevolence focuses primarily on filial piety and family ethics, with parents, brothers and sisters as the basic unit of social relations, and then extends the kind heart and love to others. In the second level, Confucius used the "universal love" to extend the ethical benevolence within the family to people outside the family.

Mencius once advocated this: *"Care for my own aged parents and extend the same care to the aged parents of others; love my own young children and extend the same love to the children of others"*(Joseph, 1968), which is another emphasis on the notion that everyone should respect and love others in the way we respect and love our own loved ones. In fact, Mencius improved the Confucian universal love into a pervasive altruistic one. This altruistic spirit of caring for and helping others is the most solid foundation for the formation of volunteerism. In *"The Analects of Confucius"* alone, there are more than 100 expositions on *benevolence*. In addition to Confucius and Mencius, all Confucian scholars in the later generations made unique expositions on the same notion. For example, Dong Zhongshu proposed that *"the law of benevolence is to love others, not to love me"* (Village eds., 2017). The way to reach benevolence is to love others but not to love yourself. " , which is a manifestation of universal fraternity (*Bo'ai*).

Another example would be Cheng Hao in his *Knowing the Benevolence* putting forward *"The benevolent views everything same as himself"* (Tiwald eds. 2014) which is a higher requirement or even the highest state of benevolence. Under the same token, when we connect volunteerism with environmental protection, we would understand the sheer importance of loving all people and the earth alike. It is a vivid reflection of the essence of benevolence advocated by Cheng Hao.

The abundant discussion of benevolence in Confucianism shows that benevolence is not an abstract concept or only limited to the moral philosophical system. It is more concerned with how to practice it in real life. The different views on benevolence reflect on how to practice it in daily life. It must be said that Confucianism emphasizes on how benevolence should be practiced coincides with the practical requirements of volunteerism to some extent.

The concept of *universal love (Jian Ai)* can be said to be the most significant and unique label of the Mohist ideology. Mohist is heavily influenced by the Confucian view of benevolence. The former coined words such as *benevolence* and *benevolence and love* in his discussion of universal love. However, there is a huge difference between the two. What Mohist advocates is *Love each other and benefit each other*, meaning everyone should treat each other with equal love and mutual benefit, and should be differentiated by blood or familiarity. Whereas Confucian holds that one should love his own families before he loves others while Mohist proposes love from far to near, saying that *If I first engage in the love of others, and then I may be loved by themselves in return.*

Rhetorical questions were frequently used in Mohist to strengthen the idea that *If everyone around the world love each other and one loves himself, should we still worry about being unfilial? Are there still unfilial person? If the subordinate and the superior love each other as they love their own bodies, should we still worry about not being benevolent? Are there still be those with no mercy?* (Johnston, 1929) Mohist is asking if universal love is achieved everywhere, then the fidelity and royalty advocated by Confucius seems to be unnecessary (Cua, 2004). Although Mohist's proposition is quite idealistic, in terms of practical significance, he reflects the meaning of fairness, justice and democracy in modern society. We therefore propose that universal love under mutual benefit is closer to the

essence of friendship and mutual help of volunteerism.

2 Study

In our study, we randomly surveyed 1,762 college students with the following two questions, “What do you think is the essence of volunteerism” and “What do you think is the biggest gain after participating in voluntary service”. Survey results (see figure 1) show that the respondents who believe the essence of volunteerism as selfless dedication relatively have a higher level of self-sacrifice when serving others and society. They do not do it simply for the improvement of professional ability or related experience certificates which were responded with a slightly lower proportion.

In addition, a higher percentage of volunteers who believe that the essence of volunteerism is more embodied in “unity and mutual assistance” replied that their biggest gains are “improvement of interpersonal communication ability and organizational coordination

ability” or “social recognition, respect of others”. This shows that the volunteers have obtained a harmonious interpersonal experience in the process of serving others, and it also reflects from one side that the promotion of volunteer culture has a good mass foundation. In fact, volunteerism is inextricably linked to China’s traditional virtues. If we find a suitable entry point in the intersection of tradition and modernity, the creation of a volunteer cultural atmosphere and the promotion of volunteerism will surely flourish. Finally, a volunteer who understands “social responsibility awareness” as the essence of volunteer spirit will not particularly care about “mental satisfaction and happiness” after participating in volunteer services, but feels it a strong responsibility and obligation to help others as emphasized by Kant’s moral laws and regulations, so the satisfaction obtained after voluntary action is naturally lower. In the view of moral absolutism, it is immoral to obtain spiritual satisfaction and happiness even after helping others (Table 1).

Table 1. Essence of volunteerism and gain from voluntary service

	Charity spirit		Moral conscience		Selfless dedication		Unity and cooperation		Humanitarian emotion		Social responsibility		Confucius spirit	
	n	percentage	n	percentage	n	percentage	n	percentage	n	percentage	n	percentage	n	percentage
My biggest gain after volunteering is														
a.I gained a spiritual satisfaction and happiness	768	86.40%	673	83.60%	966	84.10%	688	84.50%	748	85.30%	1018	80.70%	79	88.80%
b.I received professional training and improved my ability	268	30.10%	253	31.40%	329	28.70%	270	33.20%	262	29.90%	359	28.50%	43	48.30%
c.I improved my interpersonal communication and organization coordination ability.	627	70.50%	559	69.40%	800	69.70%	602	74.00%	612	69.80%	887	70.30%	65	73.00%
d.I gained social recognition and respects form others.	366	41.20%	329	40.90%	439	38.20%	361	44.30%	350	39.90%	490	38.90%	60	67.40%
e.I received voluntary certificates and relevant certificate	280	31.50%	252	31.30%	325	28.30%	259	31.80%	286	32.60%	384	30.50%	47	52.80%
sum	889		805		1148		814		877		1261		89	

It should be noted that since there are very few respondents who chose the Confucian spirit as the essence of volunteerism, it is easy to cause statistical invalidation during data interpretation and has no research value. Therefore, the data on the Confucian spirit is considered to be unreliable, which is thus not subject to analysis of this article. However, we can also interpret from the little data that the few college students who understand the essence of volunteerism as Confucianism have little or no knowledge of volunteerism, and believe that the greatest gain from participating in volunteering is “receiving professional training, self-improvement” and “volunteer service experience certificate and related certificates”. It is precisely because this part of college students that who do not have high self-awareness and self-identity in volunteerism, which makes them more utilitarian in participating in volunteer services.

3 Discussion

There are two key stages for the development of volunteer services in China: one is the establishment of the China Youth Volunteers Association in Beijing in 1994, marking the official birth of volunteer services in China; the other marks the flourish of volunteers: year 2008 when Wenchuan Earthquake hit China and the Beijing Olympic Games. Since the two major national events, voluntary service has developed rapidly at a blowout rate throughout the country. “Love” is a traditional Chinese virtue rooted in the hearts of the broad masses of people, and is the source of modern volunteerism. To a certain extent, however, these traditional Chinese virtues are just the bearing soil for volunteerism, traditional ethics of thousands of years old have not directly transformed into volunteerism in modern sense throughout history. After the founding of the PRC China, the Lei Feng spirit and the socialist collectivist values produced under certain historical backgrounds have profoundly changed the ideological and moral concepts of the Chinese people, and those were even once the only moral codes for the moral spirit life of Chinese. Recent development of socialist market economy has to some extent mitigated the heavy influence of Lei Feng spirit and collectivism on Chinese mindset, but they still cast great influence on the imbedded Chinese culture in the sense that these two type of spirit share an identical moral concept and driving force with volunteerism.

From the perspective of time, Lei Feng’s spirit is the

moral spirit rooted in the hearts of the people of the whole country under the special historical background in the 1960s, and its occurrence precedes the volunteerism. The core of Lei Feng’s spirit is “serving the people wholeheartedly”, which is a totally altruistic value, different from the core values of the volunteer spirit of “dedication, friendship, mutual assistance and progress”. With the change of people’s spiritual life, Lei Feng’s spirit is constantly being given new meanings of the times. The reason why volunteerism could be recognized by the whole society in such a short time lies in the early development and promotion of Lei Feng’s spirit.

Even in the early days of volunteer service development, whether it was in the private sector or in the government, there was often a media narrative like “promoting the spirit of Lei Feng and conducting volunteer service”. Therefore, the two are overlapping in many aspects in real life. Through the continuous interpretation and manifestation of Lei Feng’s spirit and volunteerism, many interesting phenomena have emerged. For example, volunteering to serve the community to help vulnerable groups will be understood as a “learning from Lei Feng” activity while participating in large-scale competitions or public welfare volunteer services such as environmental protection will not be called “learning from Lei Feng” activities. We can understand from it that volunteer service contains more extensive content than the “Learning Lei Feng” activity, so the volunteerism has a broader meaning than the Lei Feng spirit. Volunteerism implies a moral spirit that is completely altruistic and self-interested.

Mr. Fei Xiaotong once said, “From the grass-roots level, Chinese society is vernacular” (Fei,1989). Indeed, our country has been a self-sufficient smallholder economic model for thousands of years of feudal society. Settlement has formed a clan-like group-self relationship with blood bond as the core. In Confucian culture, the concept of benevolence based on filial piety is only under this clan-like collectivism standard, which can be deeply ingrained in our traditional culture. Many scholars have concluded when studying the roots of volunteerism: Western kindness is undifferentiated love, while benevolence or universal love in China’s traditional culture is different love, which is promoted based primarily on blood bond, then to a larger extent to those outside the family or clan. With the approaching of 20th century, the modernization reform has developed

rapidly from top to bottom in the vast land of China. From the perspective of productivity, modernization is industrialization. Under this background, China's smallholder economy has completely disintegrated, especially after the establishment of the planned economy system after the founding of the PRC China. The main social organization system has been transformed into a "unit system" in urban areas and a "people's commune system" in rural areas. This kind of social organization system became an obvious feature of China at that time. "Communities" and "units" have completely changed the structure of people's social life. The mandatory dependency relationship allows individuals to attach to "units" or "communities", while "units" and "communities" depend on the state. This group-individual relationship has reshaped the moral and ethical outlook of the Chinese people. The feudal society emphasizes the collective and individual interests of the family and the country. While affirming the individual's pursuit of happiness, he or she sets the clan or country as the goal of individual value realization. Under the centralized planned economic system, collective interests are higher than individual interests. It is the moral principle of collectivism in a socialist society that is completely altruistic or self-sacrifice when necessary. Although this collectivist value in the period of the planned economy has obvious flaws, its positive significance is also beyond doubt, and it has accumulated a broad spiritual foundation and popular support for the occurrence and development of the country's volunteerism in the coming years.

After the reform and opening-up, China's economic system has changed from a highly concentrated planned economy to a socialist market economy, and the state has paid more attention to the enthusiasm of encouraging individual labor with policies and systems. The unit system, commune system, household registration system, personal income distribution and other systems of the traditional planned economy period have been reformed accordingly. Traditional collectivism values have gradually been diluted in people's spiritual life due to the lack of system guarantees, and the individual rights and consciousness were greatly enhanced. The collectivist values of the new era contain more and more individual factors. The fundamental reason for the success of the socialist market economy today is to affirm and encourage the enthusiasm and creativity of individual labor. With the continuous progress of society, people's values

have also changed. While maintaining collective interests, individuals continue to yearning for the realization of self-worth and accumulation of personal wealth. However, we should be aware that China is a socialist country, collectivism is our intrinsic value. As Deng Xiaoping once said, we encourage people from some region proper first before others, and then they can bring along the back regions as part of the country's extraneous effort to eliminate exploitation, polarization and ultimately achieve shared prosperity (Deng, 1994). Therefore, the spirit of fairness, justice, complete altruism and a high degree of self-sacrifice embodied in traditional collectivist values provide a rich nourishment for the modern volunteerism. In turn, the unity, mutual assistance and selfless dedication contained in volunteerism provides a more vivid manifestation for collectivism in that the organizational elements reflected in volunteerism is highly compatible with collectivism.

4 Results

Volunteer service is new to China which emerged at the end of the last century. Chinese people's awareness of volunteerism is therefore relatively lagging. "Dedication, Friendship, Mutual Assistance, Progress" was condensed into the core of the volunteer spirit, and it was gradually formed in the promotion of the activities with the continuous development of volunteer service activities. The slogan put forward in its actions after the establishment of the China Youth Volunteers Association has been popularized and promoted in the country's voluntary cultural propaganda, becoming the most widely interpretation of volunteerism in popular culture. The discussion of volunteerism in the domestic research community has only been sporadically started since the beginning of this century. To date, research on volunteerism has not been systematic, and no unanimous view has been reached. With this as a general background, individual college students' understanding of volunteerism is quite "localized". The so-called localization here refers to the original ecology, which means that college students' cognition of volunteerism has not yet reached a consensus that even those have practiced in volunteering have quite savage idea of volunteerism. When being asked the question "How do you understand the volunteer spirit of college students", some of the interviewees have to think for a long time, and some of them even show that it is difficult to answer or summarize in simple words.

They can only come up with limited descriptions of volunteerism under certain guidance by the visitor. And more often than not, these descriptions are basically based on the individual volunteers' experience of volunteer service. They often retrieved similar words in their own moral and value systems, transformed or grafted into their cognition of volunteerism. Some even equated their own feelings and experiences summarized in practice with their understanding of volunteerism.

Cultivating volunteerism and promoting volunteer culture are the core elements for the promotion and development of volunteer services. Volunteer culture is a sign that the volunteerism has been successfully socialized, and it is the result of the promotion of the collective spirit paradigm, thus occupying a place in the rich value culture of human society.

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