

Chinese Volunteering in Africa

Drivers, Issues and Future Prospects

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Abstract Due to the growing importance of people-to-people diplomacy in China's global strategies, this is a momentous time for China's international development volunteering. Drawing from underexploited Chinese sources, the paper shows that international volunteering has the potential for enhancing China's public appeal globally and giving a 'softer' connotation to China's aid to Africa. In this paper the policy, practices, and discourses about China's voluntary service are examined and framed within the context of China's soft power strategies. Moreover, the recent domestic debate on shortcomings of the 'China Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program' in Africa and the new directions suggested to the country's leadership by influential Chinese academics are critically analysed. The focus is on the tailoring of a new political and ideological 'space' for the Chinese NGOs as implementers of future international volunteering programs. In spite of considerable debates and evolutions, Chinese international volunteering programs seems to remain under tight state control and to be best understood as social engineering efforts, with China's soft power as their main objective.

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Keywords Chinese youth volunteering. Chinese NGOs. China-Africa relations. Chinese soft power. China's foreign aid.

1 Introduction

Due to the growing importance of people-to-people diplomacy in China's strategies in Africa, this is a momentous time for China's international development volunteer initiatives.¹

¹ The general outline of the work was discussed jointly by the authors, however Antonella Ceccagno is responsible for sections 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and Sofia Graziani for sections 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. The introduction and conclusions have been written jointly by the authors.

Drawing from underexploited Chinese sources, this article addresses the origins, development, internal contestation, and changing features of Chinese international aid strategies centered on voluntary service.

Development aid is a growing area of engagement between governments and citizens of parts of the world with different global leverage and power. Volunteering in the domain of international development has recently been dubbed 'a contested field' given that it perpetuates global asymmetrical relations. For instance, Georgeou (2012, p. 54) points out that development volunteers have become the human face of government-funded programs serving the dominant political and economic interest of donor states.

The Chinese government undertook to send volunteers abroad only in 2002 (Li 2006). Chinese international voluntary service, therefore, is a relatively recent development.

Even though the first batch of Chinese international volunteers was sent to Laos, and Africa officially became a destination for Chinese volunteers only in 2004 according to some authors (Li, Luo 2013) or 2005 according to other authors (Wang, Huang, Liu 2012), Africa is by far the largest beneficiary of Chinese international voluntary service. Therefore, in this paper Chinese international voluntary service and Chinese voluntary service in Africa are intended as interchangeable.

This paper examines the practice and policy of China's international aid voluntary service and frames the issues surrounding new approaches and future prospects for voluntary service in Africa within the context of China's soft power strategies.

China's international voluntary service springs out of government-sponsored domestic volunteering programs centered on youth and builds on a decade-long experience in organizing volunteers at home. Its development is part of a larger set of the Chinese state's direct and indirect diplomatic activities conducted in the framework of Beijing's growing concern with improving China's image around the world, and in Africa in particular. Besides sending volunteers, in fact, the new Chinese soft power strategies towards Africa also include many other activities, some of which are connected with voluntary service, such as liaising with selected African NGOs active on social issues and indirectly engaging in philanthropic charity by lobbying for donations Chinese private and state-owned enterprises that work in Africa (Brenner 2012).²

While both voluntary service in China and China's presence in Africa have been the subject of many, often controversial, debates among schol-

2 This is one of the main roles played by the Chinese-African People's Friendship Organization (CAPFA), supervised by The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. According to Brenner (2012, p. 143), «CAPFA function as a charity arm of Chinese enterprises» and its work is conducted in accordance with Beijing's aim of improving China's image in Africa.

ars (Ding 2005; Yang 2005; Rolandsen 2010; Brautigam 2009; King 2013; Fijalkowski 2011; Sun 2014, among others), there is a lack of academic literature in regard to Chinese international voluntary service and its role in Chinese strategies in Africa. In English-language scholarship this is an often-mentioned topic, yet no comprehensive analysis has so far been conducted concerning its drivers, development, and implications. This issue, however, is of crucial importance if we are to understand the multiple facets of China's 'going out' strategy. This paper undertakes to bridge this gap.

The first part of the article documents the origins and development of China's international volunteer programs and explores the content, practices, and discourses animating the Chinese approach to international voluntary work within the larger framework of China's growing international outreach and global agency. It undertakes to analyse the critical role the Chinese government attaches to citizens' participation in volunteer service both at home and abroad as a tool for engineering support for the government agenda and for enhancing China's soft power. The article focuses on the China Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program (also known as Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program) and shows that China's international aid volunteering as a government sponsored policy has emerged as an expansion of the approach and programmes already at work at the domestic level.

The second part highlights the recent Chinese government's perception of voluntary service as having the potential for giving new connotations to Chinese aid to Africa. On the basis of crucial but underexplored materials, the article documents and critically analyses the recent domestic debate on limits and shortcomings of the China Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program in Africa and the new directions suggested to the country's leadership by Chinese influential academics writing in official journals. The focus is on possible pathways of reorganization of Chinese international volunteering, including the tailoring of a new political and ideological 'space' for inclusion of Chinese NGOs as implementers of future international volunteering programs within the new Chinese soft-power strategies in Africa. The article undertakes a comparison of the decades-long process of carving out a space for volunteering and social organizations within China with the parallel process now taking place at the international level, and the resistance to this trend.

This article makes a case regarding the evolution of China international volunteering programs, i.e. that in spite of considerable debates and evolutions, these programs remain under tight state control and are best understood as social engineering efforts, with China's soft power as its main objective.

The coupling of soft power strategies and tight state control, however, remains problematic, according to some outstanding analysts. In his study on China's global presence, David Shambaugh (2013, p. 214) argues that while in Joseph Nye's original work (2004), «soft power appeal [...] comes

almost entirely and intrinsically from *society* – not from government», China's conception of soft power is state-generated. In his analysis, political control over society is actually an obstacle to China's attempt to build its cultural soft power worldwide. As this article shows, the Chinese academic elite does not question the top down character of the state's soft power strategies focusing on international volunteering but only suggests the shifts that may increase the effectiveness of those strategies.

2 State-managed Volunteer Service in Post-Mao China

In the early 2000s, as part and parcel of its strategy for global influence and soft power construction, China officially began to send 'volunteers' abroad through government sponsored programs that built on a decade-long experience of organizing volunteers at home.

With a history tracing back to the Mao era, when Lei Feng, the selfless soldier who died in August 1962, was turned into a moral model for all Chinese, official volunteer service re-emerged in the early 1990s in the context of China's deepening market reforms and the shedding of more and more welfare responsibilities by the state. At the national level formal volunteering has been sponsored by the government and organized through two main official channels: the Community Service Volunteers organizations under the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA); and the China Youth Volunteer Association (CYVA) within the framework of the CYL-initiated Young Volunteers Action (*qingnian zhiyuanzhe xingdong*).³ Besides, many other official or semi-official organizations providing volunteer services have been set up, one prominent example being the China Charity Federation and its local branches (Ding 2004; Li 2007, pp. 51-56). At the same time, with the deepening of the market reforms and government encouragement, new opportunities have opened up for the growth of relatively autonomous social organizations, whose relationship with the State has been the object of much, often controversial, debate among Western scholars. While the government recognized the need to allow the expansion of the non-governmental sector to address unmet social needs, improve governance and prevent the rise of social instability, various measures have been introduced since the 1990s to monitor their activities and ensure that they won't challenge the CCP authority (Ma 2006, Saich 2000, among others). As such, organizations providing volunteer service in the welfare sector have been particularly encouraged by the state and even unregistered groups have found their space of action (Xu, Ngai 2011).

³ Founded in 1994 by the CYL, the CYVA is the largest voluntary service organization in China.

Encouraged and praised in official speeches by Party and state leaders as well as in the media since the late 1990s, volunteering has also made its appearance in Party and government policy documents (Ding 2005, p. 9). At the same time, the Young Volunteers Action has developed into many projects (Ding 2005, pp. 4-9), one of the most popular being the Plan of College Graduate Volunteer Service in Western China (*daxuesheng zhiyuan fuwu xibu jihua*), which since 2003 has sent university graduates to underdeveloped Western regions (Gongqingtuan 2007, pp. 501-502).⁴ Specific measures and preferential policies have been introduced to motivate students to participate (Ding 2005, p. 9). For instance, college and university students who have successfully completed long-term volunteer service organized by the CYL may receive preferential treatment when it comes to admission to graduate schools.⁵

Hustinx, Handy and Cnaan (2012, p. 57) argue that in contemporary China «most volunteer efforts are (in)directly government initiated or government funded» and «volunteering may be seen as ... [a] response to government initiatives rather than one that is purely voluntary». Drawing on the idea of 'post-revolutionary mobilization' as conceptualized by White in 1990, Hustinx and colleagues argue that most volunteering is part of a state-led institutionalized mobilization used by the post-Mao regime as an instrument of political and social 'engineering' aimed at promoting the government agenda.

Xu (2012) shows that at the national level two parallel systems have been established to monitor the voluntary sector: the Ministry of Civil Affairs System and the CYL system. In fact - as Xu argues - in the last two decades the CYL has acquired a dominant status in the voluntary sector and its power in governing volunteering has gradually strengthened within the bureaucratic system. If on the one hand, the CYL system has provided space for the development of self-organized voluntary social organizations (VSOs), its 'ascribed political capital' as the CCP's 'main assistant' (*zhushou*) and 'reserve force' (*houbei jun*) has helped the CYL local organizations to advance their presence at the grassroots and legitimize the activities of unregistered (and thus technically illegal) groups whose action is considered politically safe and beneficial to the social welfare.⁶

Top-down volunteering has been especially targeted on youth, particularly the well-educated who are largely perceived as the future backbone

4 The project became a national policy jointly issued by the CYL, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Personnel (see Notice on College Graduate Volunteer Service 2003).

5 Information acquired during fieldwork conducted by Sofia Graziani in Beijing in 2006 and again in 2011 thanks to the Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) fellowship.

6 On the historical and political role of the CYL in the PRC, see Graziani 2013.

of society (Hustinx, Handy, Cnaan 2012). This trend results from two main government concerns: rising levels of unemployment among young graduates (especially since the early 2000s) as well as the need to improve the moral and ideological education of the younger generation. Indeed, following the 1989 Tian'anmen student movement, the CCP called for an enhanced concentration on ideological and political education and the promotion of officially-desired moral values and collective goals among the young. As such, patriotism, now emphasized as the Party main source of legitimacy, was identified as a core value that had the potential to unite all young people under the same banner, equating the love for the motherland with the love for the CCP (Rosen 2004, on patriotic education campaign Wang 2008, Zhao 1998, among others). With a young generation increasingly individualistic and success-oriented, at a time when old propaganda themes and techniques are losing ground in favor of new and softer language and approaches (Brady 2008), the discourse on volunteering has also been reshaped to merge old and new themes: the politicized collective rhetoric of selfless contribution by model citizens (reminiscent of the Maoist ethics of the 1960s) has thus been accommodated with new notions of individual choice and flexibility (Rolandsen 2010). At the same time, volunteer service has been officially constructed as serving both the motherland and the realization of the self.

Not by chance, in 1993 the CYL CC urged youth to play a more active role in the country's economic and social development (Wang 1993). At the same time, it initiated the Young Volunteers Action as an organized movement with the aim of contributing to the construction of a 'socialist spiritual civilization' (*shehuizhuyi jingsheng wenming*) and improving the whole 'quality' (*suzhi*)⁷ of the young (Cao 2004, pp. 215-224). Since then, volunteering as a new and soft means of social control and regimentation of the youth has become one of the most important task of the CYL. In fact, the CYL-founded CYVA, while organizing a growing number of young volunteers, has maintained significant ties with the Party-state,⁸ being utilized by the Party apparatus as a propaganda tool to reach a broader group of young, well-educated people who might otherwise be outside Party's circles (Rolandsen 2010, pp. 142-147). At the same time, as shown above,

7 The term *suzhi* has broad connotations in today's China, generally referring to prescribed social norms (on this issue see, for instance, Yan Hairong 2003). 'Spiritual civilization' is also a term with broad connotations encompassing a set of values for Chinese society. According to Anne-Marie Brady, through setting social norms, spiritual civilization activities in post-Mao China are a soft form of social control and regimentation of the public minds (Brady 2008, p. 117).

8 In 1998 the CYL CC set up the «youth volunteer guiding centre» in charge of planning, coordinating, and guiding volunteer service, that also serves as the Secretariat of the CYVA (Gongqingtuan 2010, p. 294).

the CYL has stepped up efforts to advance its presence at the grassroots level and establish ties with self-organized groups.

Thus, since the 1990s volunteer service sector has gradually expanded, involving both official and self-organized grassroots groups, mainly as a response to government initiatives and encouragement. In particular, youth volunteering has been largely organized and overseen (both directly and indirectly) by the CYL as a tool for channeling youth activism towards officially accepted goals and away from politically risky activities and as a means for 'cultivating' the young generation. At the same time, the government and its related agencies have established ties with newly emerged VSOs so as to boost social support and public participation within acceptable boundaries. It is against this framework that a domestic debate has developed on the need to turn the government role from direct involvement to supporting and commissioning non-profit organizations (Yang 2005). This issue will be discussed further below.

3 Domestic Volunteering, Harmonious Society and Soft Power

Volunteer service has been highly encouraged in China since 2006 in conjunction with the promotion by the CCP leaders of the new political agenda of the 'harmonious society' (*hexie shehui*), aimed at promoting social justice and reducing social inequalities resulting from almost two decades of economic reforms (Miranda 2006, Miller 2007, among others). At the same time, it coincides with the CCP renovated emphasis on creating a «socialist core value system» and improving public morality among the population (Miller 2007). As Saich argues, these developments reflected political leaders awareness of the need to «lay down 'moral and ideological foundations' underpinning the policies to build the 'harmonious society'» (Saich 2011, p. 98). As such, volunteer spirit – officially defined as embodying values such as «devotion, fraternal love, mutual help, progress» (*fengxian, you'ai, huzhu, jinbu*) – was increasingly perceived as a positive instrument to combat the growing individualism in society and fill the 'moral vacuum' produced by the CCP-promoted market reforms. Not by chance, in the mid-2000s voluntary service started to be narrated as a morally superior behavior (rooted in both traditional culture and Maoist revolutionary tradition), beneficial to the building of the government-advocated harmonious society (Chen 2006, among others).

The introduction of the 'harmonious society' concept into the Party ideology and the government agenda was followed by an unprecedented attention to avoiding that rising social tensions and problems, such as unemployment, could eventually explode into 'chaos' and undermine the CCP authority. The lessons learned from the colour revolutions in a number of former communist states in the early 2000s further increased Chinese

leaders awareness of the potential dangers of genuine civil society. With 'stability maintenance' (*weihu wending*) becoming a top priority, the leadership increased efforts to enhance control mechanisms, advance the Party presence at the grassroots and steer the development of a politically safe Chinese civil society that would improve governance and serve the CCP's ends (Brady 2012, pp. 23-24; Teets 2013; Thornton 2013). The idea of civil society as a social space to be reached by the Party's ideological and political work and filled by social groups that are expected to develop the «citizens' political consciousness, citizens' strong sense of social responsibility and [...] a true and rich compassion and other desirable moral qualities» (Gao 2007, pp. 74-75) was elaborated in a 2007 article which appeared in some internal Party journals (*Dangzheng ganbu luntan* and *Lilun yu gaige*) and was then reprinted in the CCP Central Committee theoretical journal, *Qiushi* (Seeking Truth) (Gao 2007). According to Brady, it is a response to the government's ever-increasing awareness that non-government organizations could become agents for political change, that civic 'participation' has been emphasized since the mid-2000s, with the CCP advocating and supervising large-scale volunteer projects (Brady 2012, pp. 23-24).

It is against this backdrop that in 2008 China experienced a wave of volunteering, whose main impetus came from youths (Clark 2012, pp. 183-186). This wave was prompted by a series of mass events, the most prominent being the long-planned Beijing Olympic Games and the unpredicted Wenchuan earthquake. While the latter event saw a large number of volunteers spontaneously assisting victims, the Beijing Olympics saw half a million volunteers participating in a large-scale project, advocated and overseen by the state, aimed at involving as many Chinese as possible in the production and showcasing of a 'new' positive national image. In fact, huge numbers of volunteers, especially university students, were selected and trained for the event, being molded into 'model citizens' (De Kloet, Pak Lei Chong, Landsberger 2011).

By the end of 2000s, against the backdrop of the global financial crisis and China's increased international status and self-confidence, the domestic media started to narrate voluntary service as a powerful 'social soft power' (*shehui ruan shili*) tool. On December 9, 2009, *Jinan Daily* published a theoretical forum entitled «Volunteer service is a powerful social soft power», stating that the genuine participation and selfless contribution of volunteers in both the Sichuan earthquake and the Olympic Games proved that the development of volunteering in China had entered a new phase and had become indispensable to a 'civilized society', embodying cultural values deemed important to «elevate the country's soft power internation-

ally» (Shehui ruanshili 2009).⁹ The concept of 'social soft power' had just been put forward by Ding Yuanzhu, the Director of the Research Centre for Volunteering and Welfare at Peking University, in an article appeared in *Wenhui bao*. Ding stresses the importance of forging 'social soft power' as a component of a country overall soft power, defining it as «a general mood, a cohesive force and the attraction established by the members of a country's own society through every kind of cultural activity, social activity and behaviour that can reflect the value of human progress» (Ding 2009). His elaboration of the concept of 'social soft power' is particularly interesting as it adds an international dimension to domestic volunteering: by linking citizen's civic participation through volunteer service to the building of a general, predominant, mood in the society, Ding treats volunteer service as an activity that will build 'social cohesion' (*shehui ningju*) - and thus social stability - at home and in turn elevate the country's attraction vis-à-vis other nations.

In turn, the social atmosphere - created by citizen's civic participation through volunteer service - is deemed to reflect a country's own cultural and value system.

After experiencing the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake I firmly believe that China's volunteer spirit is rooted in China's traditional culture. Today... volunteer action is deciphering again the traditional moral excellence of the Chinese people. [...] A nation that in facing difficulties is able of mutual help and mutual support, will obtain even more the praise and the trust of the international community [...] (Ding 2009)

As such, volunteer service may serve the purpose of showcasing China's 'traditional values' internationally, thus contributing to the government recent attempt to elevate China's cultural soft power worldwide.

Thus, volunteering is encouraged as a desirable form of institutionalized citizen participation taking place within pre-defined ideological and political boundaries. It is encouraged as an instrument of political and social 'engineering' aimed at promoting a government agenda and supporting the CCP's goals. In fact, being located within the broader discourses of the harmonious society and soft power, it is conceptualized as conducive to a cohesive, politically safe, 'civil society' in which social conflicts are 'harmonized' and as instrumental to the realization of the country's national interests.

9 In 2013 the same theme was covered in the central Party organ *Guangming ribao*, highlighting the potential of volunteers as a newly emerging force in the construction of 'civilized cities' (Gu 2013).

4 The 'Going Out' of China's Volunteer Service

As mentioned above, China officially begun to send volunteers abroad in the early 2000s when two distinct government-sponsored national programs were initiated. The China Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program (*Zhongguo qingnian zhiyuanzhe haiwai fuwu jihua*) was launched jointly by the CYL CC and the CYVA in May 2002. Young Chinese started to be dispatched to developing countries to provide long-term, generally one-year, development assistance in various fields including Chinese language teaching, physical education, medical treatment, information technology and agricultural technique (Gongqingtuan 2007, pp. 503-504). As an expansion of the above-mentioned CYL-managed Youth Volunteer Movement, this international program fully represents the 'going out' (*zou-chu guomen*) of China's domestic volunteering (Li 2006).

Another program, called the Chinese Language Teachers Volunteering Program (*Guoji Hanyu jiaoshi Zhongguo zhiyuanzhe jihua*) was approved by the Ministry of Education and has been implemented by the Office of Chinese Language Council (*Hanban*) since 2004, after a pilot project had dispatched 40 volunteers in Thailand and Philippines in 2003 (Ministry of Education n.d.).

Despite being distinct programs, the Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program and the Chinese Language Teachers Volunteering Program tend to overlap in Chinese accounts of the international volunteer service. Moreover they are often confused especially when it comes to involved the government agencies and the numbers of dispatched volunteers. While the Chinese Language Teachers Volunteering Program is open to educated Chinese citizens of any age under 60 years old - even though it seems that young graduates in their twenties participate in large numbers (Song 2008, p. 105) - and sends Chinese language volunteers worldwide, accounting for around 10,000 volunteers dispatched in 89 countries by 2010 (Gao 2012, p. 35), the China Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program is targeted at young people and is designed to bring assistance to developing nations (especially to Africa) as part and parcel of China's foreign aid. Moreover, despite being much more limited in terms of numbers than the Language Teachers Volunteering Program, it is expected to grow in the near future, eventually becoming an effective and influential tool of China's soft power in Africa.¹⁰

¹⁰ With the exception of Kenneth King (2013) and Deborah Brautigam (2009), no one has paid attention to the limited reach of this project so far, acknowledging that numbers remain small.

5 The Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program in China's International Aid

Begun with the assignment of a small group of volunteers to Laos (Li 2008), in little more than a decade (2002-2013) the Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program has dispatched 590 Chinese volunteers to 22 countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America (Huang et al. 2013b, p. 15; same numbers found in Gongqingtuan 2013). So far, young volunteers have provided assistance in three main fields: cultural education (50%), science and technology service (31%), medical and health treatment (16%) (Huang et al. 2013a, p. 59; Gongqingtuan 2003).

Africa is by far the largest recipient (69%), with 408 volunteers dispatched to 16 countries. While the first group of Chinese volunteers was officially sent to Africa in October 2004 as part of the Volunteer Program for International Chinese Teachers of the Office of Chinese Language Council (Hanyu jiaoshi zhiyuanzhe 2004), young volunteer assistance to Africa began as part of the Youth Volunteers Overseas Service Program in 2005 with the assignment of the first 12 volunteers to Ethiopia where they worked on programs dealing with methane development, Chinese teaching and information technology (Cui, Shi, Li 2005; Shinn, Eisenman 2012, p. 154). According to available data, Ethiopia is the African country that received most volunteers under this program from 2005 to 2009 (Wu, Zhang, Xu 2010, p. 68).

According to Chinese scholars, in the period 2005-2009 the China Youth Volunteers Overseas Service developed on a larger scale (Zhiyuanzhe de bufa 2013). In fact, in 2005 the program was formally brought into China's government policy on foreign aid (Gongqingtuan 2007, pp. 503-504; Li 2006). At the same time, it began to be known as Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers (*yuanwai qingnian zhiyuanzhe*) program, being run by three main agencies: the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Central Committee of the CYL (Wang, Huang, Liu 2012). In 2006 international youth volunteers first appeared in a government paper on China's African policy, as part of the «people-to-people exchanges» (*minjian jiao-wang*) (State Council 2006) and references to young volunteers were then included in FOCAC agreements. At the Beijing Summit and third FOCAC the Chinese government decided to expand the program, setting the goal of sending 300 youth volunteers to deliver assistance to African countries in various fields over the following three years (FOCAC 2006). From 2010 onward, however, the program experienced a low tide as the government started to rethink it, while – as it will be discussed below – Chinese scholars began to provide suggestions for improving the program and enhancing its public appeal in Africa. While in FOCAC IV in Egypt (2009) there was no specific commitment from the Chinese side, volunteers were back in

the agreements of FOCAC V where it was said that «China will continue to send young volunteers to African countries and encourage them to play a positive role in community building and social welfare sectors» (FOCAC 2012). A similar commitment has been reiterated in the last FOCAC (2015). At the same time, references to young volunteers were included in China's White Papers on foreign aid (Information Office of the State Council of the PRC 2011, 2014). As such, in 2012 they were back on the agenda.

Volunteers are recruited through government-controlled channels and are selected by the CYVA under the CYL. According to central directives and national regulations, in order to be eligible candidates are required to be Chinese citizens in the 20-35 age-bracket. Besides meeting health and education requirements, candidates are required to be devoted to the motherland, happy to make a contribution to the collective and love volunteer service. Moreover, priority is given to candidates who have successfully participated in CYL sponsored youth volunteers long-term service project at the domestic level or those who have been publicly honoured as outstanding volunteers by the CYL or CYVA organizations. The selection process also includes a political investigation on the candidate (Gongqingtuan 2006; Ministry of Commerce 2004). In some cases, the central government requires that a province, municipality or organization provide volunteers for a particular country. For example, the volunteers for Seychelles come from the Guangzhou Youth Volunteers Association, while volunteers sent to Togo in 2009 have been recruited by the Shenzhen city government (Shinn, Eisenman 2012, p. 154).

Yet, at the local level further conditions may be set for volunteer recruitment. In 2008, for instance, the CYL committee of Chongqing municipality launched a project for volunteer service in Mauritius where a total of 41 young volunteers were to be sent over five years. In 2013 a new round was announced, calling local organizations of the CYL and the CYVA to select 17 volunteers to be dispatched to Mauritius to participate in projects related mainly to Chinese language teaching. Here political affiliation, that is CCP or CYL membership, was mentioned under the heading recruitment terms. Furthermore, the evaluation process by CYL and CYVA included reference to a preliminary screening on the candidate's 'spiritual and ideological quality' (Chongqing shi 2013). Similar provisions are found in the most recent recruitment announcements (March 2015). These practices clearly reveal that strict ideological conformism is required by the Chinese authorities and that organizers pay crucial attention on recruiting people who are 'politically reliable'.¹¹

¹¹ The organizers' concern of recruiting people who are 'politically reliable' may also explain why sometimes only volunteers working for state-owned enterprises are selected (Brautigam 2009, pp. 124-125).

6 International Volunteering, South-south Cooperation and Soft Power

International volunteering is a crucial aspect of China's current diplomatic strategy, being understood as a 'people-to-people' aid program designed to enhance China's public appeal and global influence.

While scholarly attention is mainly focused on China's domestic volunteering, its growing international voluntary programs are still scarcely investigated. Only a few Western scholars have briefly mentioned international volunteering in their analysis of China's aid, diplomacy and soft power in Africa. As such, China's youth volunteers have been defined as «goodwill ambassadors» (Alden 2007, p. 27) or «the face of China's newest soft power aid programme» (Brautigam 2009, p. 125). In her book, Brautigam (2009) refers to youth volunteers serving in Africa as the human resource side of China's soft power and suggests that a more visible 'people-to-people' aid program could play a role in China's attempt to reassure the world that its rise will be 'peaceful'. The Chinese government has indeed been recently attempting to officially present China's foreign policy approach as based on the ideal of a 'harmonious world' and on the principles of peace, cooperation and common prosperity so as to persuade the international community that it will not be a threat to other nations (Chen 2013, Ding 2008, among the others).

Similarly, Kurlantzick (2009) places China's youth volunteer program within the realm of 'people-to-people contacts', whose improvement is fully recognized by the Chinese government as crucial for engaging non-governmental actors (the broader society) and boosting China's public appeal in Africa. Similarly, D'Hooghe (2011, p. 23) considers young volunteers as new actors of China's public diplomacy, with the potential of being better trusted by the international community than government officials and contributing more directly than traditional state actors to promoting the nation's image and expanding its global appeal.

Chinese scholars mention the volunteer scheme under the rubric of public diplomacy (Luo, Zhang 2009), with Liu Haifang (2008, p. 22) and Li Baoping (2007, pp. 8-13) considering youth volunteering as the most important medium for propagating Chinese culture among the African people and promoting friendship. Li also stresses the potential of volunteers, working «without utilitarian aims... but with just devotion and generosity», to «weaken, relieve, diminish» the Western discourses of the «China threat» and Chinese «neo-colonialism». Great emphasis on the role of volunteers as instrumental in forging the perception of China is also placed by Gao Aihui (2012), who defines volunteers as «a window through which the world understands China». These accounts shows that volunteers are expected to enhance the nation's attractivity to the outside

world and ultimately serve the nation's diplomatic strategy and interests, by spreading culture, thus reflecting the mainstream conceptualization of Chinese soft power as cultural influence.

At the same time, Chinese scholars and officials have framed international volunteering within the historically rooted discourse of south-south cooperation, based on ethical principles of equality and mutuality among developing nations. In Chinese discourse on international volunteer these two dimensions are often intertwined. For instance, in discussing Chinese volunteers in Africa, Li (2007, p. 11) emphasizes the role of volunteers in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship, but at the same time refers to the volunteer scheme in Africa as a channel for spreading Chinese culture and value conceptions and bringing about 'civilization, affluence and prosperity'. Similar interpretations can be found in official sources. At the 2006 annual plenary session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, Xu Feng from CYL CC delivered a speech that linked youth volunteers' service to the promotion of world peace. In her view, the development of the Youth Volunteer Overseas Service would benefit the enhancement of sino-foreign friendship and cooperation as well as the establishment of China's international image as a 'responsible great power'. At the same time, international volunteering is conceived as a channel for the training of «young outstanding talents with international vision» (Kaizhan haiwai zhiyuan fuwu 2006). Similar descriptions can be found in official reports as well as media accounts. In a 2011 article published in the monthly journal *International communication (Duiwai chuanbo)*, the vice-director of the Youth Volunteer Department of the CYL CC and vice-secretary of the CYVA, Pi Jun, stressed the crucial role of volunteer initiatives in establishing China's international image and training «youth outstanding talents with international vision». Then, he writes that the youth volunteers overseas service project had «huge room for development ahead» (*juda de fazhan kongjian*) and should be further expanded, promoting its place within China's overall diplomacy and turning youth volunteers into emissaries of the historically and culturally rooted idea of «harmony» (*hexie*) at a time when 'soft power' had become a prominent factor in the international competition that characterized a multipolar world and a global economy (Pi 2011).

As with much of China's rhetoric and discourse on foreign aid (King 2013, pp. 1-13), Chinese international volunteers thus appear to be framed within two broader intertwined discourses: one emphasizing ethical principles of south-south cooperation, such as solidarity, mutual trust, mutual benefit, cooperation, common development and friendship, and the other emphasizing the concept of soft power, suggestive of international competition among the nations, and largely equated by Chinese scholars and officials with an effort aimed at spreading Chinese culture abroad and «reaching out and winning the hearts and minds» of African peoples. Yet,

the question of the effectiveness of the soft power strategies remains problematic given the very nature of China's volunteer service as a state-generated and managed initiative.

7 Sending Volunteers Abroad: Pathways to Best Serve China's Strategic Interests

In early 2010s, a number of papers appeared in Chinese journals (Wang et al. 2012, Huang et al. 2013a, Women de jianyi 2013, among others) focusing on one or more aspects of the China Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program. The article «Rethinking Chinese Public Diplomacy in Africa: The Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program as a Case Study» by Wang and his colleagues (2012) is the most articulate and comprehensive public discussion on the issue of Chinese international voluntary service. The article – which appeared in *Dangdai shijie*, a journal published by the International Department of the CCP's Central Committee – adopts a critical stance towards the Program, highlights its limitations and shortcomings and suggests that Chinese policymakers adopt a new approach to international volunteering. Thus, this is an important article because it reflects an acknowledgment by the Chinese elites that some aspects of the Chinese activism in Africa do not go in the direction of the Chinese goals on the African continent and, contrary to Chinese expectations, are even producing negative reactions among Africans.

Wang and his colleagues point out that the Program is characterized by unclear and often unrealistic goals, inability to evaluate the impact of the Chinese voluntary work, and lack of clearly defined roles for the involved actors. The same vagueness in roles and goals – it is argued in the article – also characterizes other Chinese public diplomacy programs.

In particular, the authors point out that China still lacks a clear and focused positioning of the issue of international volunteering as a crucial part of China's public diplomacy. This is the result of huge differences in the understanding of the Program and its role among the decision-makers and policy implementers in different ministries. Groups of contending officials pull in different directions China's policy on international volunteering and bring about inconsistent implementations of the policy.¹² As a result, bottlenecks and even failures characterize the implementation of the Program.

The authors therefore make a plea for a shift in China's international volunteers' policy to go in a direction that best serves Beijing's global interests, including presenting a better image of China to the world.

¹² Lack of coordination and overlapping among ministries in Chinese international volunteering had also been highlighted by Li Baoping back in 2006.

Wang, Huang and Liu (2012) lament the lack of communication and coordination among the Chinese government's bodies involved in international volunteering, and point out that the same lack of communication and coordination has also emerged between China as a donor and the recipient African countries. This situation results in diverging expectations in China and in Africa: some of the Chinese institutions involved interpret the international volunteers role as 'cultural ambassadors' as a top priority, while other Chinese institutional actors together with recipient countries in Africa expect Chinese volunteers to be actively involved as specialists and to disseminate advanced knowledge and practical skills in fields relevant for the economic development of the areas involved.

Thus, this highly political paper addresses the crucial issue of which approach best serves China's long term strategic interests and, in particular, best fosters an 'all-round strategic partnership' with Africa and which approach is counterproductive for China and risks engendering mistrust among the African recipients. In an effort to reassure all the Chinese institutional actors involved that indirect tactics can best serve the Chinese goal of defending and promoting its interests in Africa, Wang, Huang and Liu (2012) argue that by first focusing on technology and knowledge transfer China's desired cultural influence would in any case reach the recipient countries as a 'sideline effect'. Technical aid offered through volunteer work in Africa could in any case bolster Chinese *Weltanschauung* and spread it throughout the donor countries. A similar approach is adopted by other Chinese scholars (see for example Women de jianyi 2013).

The questions raised by the Chinese scholars do not only pertain to China's aid to Africa. As a rule, nation-states use international development aid as a major tool in the pursuit of their national self-interests. Under neo-liberalism national self-interests are primarily economic interests (Georgeou 2012, p. 186).

What preoccupies the Chinese scholars is the modest impact of the China Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program in the receiving countries. This emerges from a survey of African government officials attending a one-year training program, and a survey of African students, both conducted in Beijing in 2011. The surveys showed that African officials were not aware that the Chinese government sent volunteers, while both African officials and students mentioned volunteers from other countries – mainly the USA, Japan and the UK – as the international volunteers that had left them with the best impression. The students did not rank Chinese volunteers very highly.

While an in-depth assessment of whether Beijing is succeeding in its efforts to reaching out and winning the support of African people is beyond the scope of this article, the internal debate points at the meager performances of the Chinese volunteers in Africa and highlights the shortcomings of the Chinese effort to match the measures undertaken by other leading powers involved in Africa.

8 Domestic Volunteering: NGOs Coming Together with the State

To a certain extent, Chinese volunteering is modelled after Western non-profit services in that it incorporates the Western way of organization and professionalism in organizing voluntary work. However, as discussed above, the relatively recent growing prominence of voluntary service in China is a top-down initiative of the state (De Kloet, Pak Lei Chong, Landsberger 2011). Since the inception of the voluntary service in China, volunteering has been organized openly through government efforts (Zhang, Lin 2008b, p. 7). This top-down approach to volunteering has had, and still is having, some crucial implications for the implementation of volunteer programs.

At the domestic level, the issue of tight government control on volunteering, and its implications, had been addressed by Xiang and Yun in a 2006 article focusing on how volunteer resources can be maximized (on this issue see also Yang 2005).

In the early 2000s, in order to address the underdevelopment of rural education, the Western China University Graduate Volunteer Teaching Program was launched to encourage volunteer teaching in rural areas that suffered from scarce education resources. Xiang and Yun (2006) point out that only 55.6% of the volunteers applying to be teachers in Western China were assigned to schools, whereas 37.8% completed their services in administrative positions in various branches of the local government. In some cases, the local governments became places where volunteers were kept so that they could «leave safe and sound after two years, just like the way they came» (Zhang, Lin 2008b, p. 6). In their analysis of voluntary service in western China, Xiang and Yun point out that volunteering was initiated and dominated by the Chinese government and that although the government support guaranteed the implementation and continuation of the work on a large scale, the dominance of the government nevertheless weakened the initiatives of volunteers through political intervention and institutionalization (see also Zhang, Lin 2008a, pp. 5-8).

In their analysis of volunteering in China, Xiang and Yun hope that the future path of volunteer work «will be as a government-initiated but socially operated movement». They argue that «only in this fashion can [...] the unidirectional development of the volunteer work stemming from the fossilized policies and the clout of the hierarchical governments be precluded» (Xiang, Yun 2006, p. 1).

Thus, the pathway suggested by Chinese scholars for the reorganization of domestic volunteering consists in allowing a greater management role for social organizations as social bodies within which volunteering could prove to be more effective.

An overview of the growing role taken on over time by non-governmental organizations at the domestic level is beyond the scope of this article. We therefore limit ourselves to a broad-stroke description of the crucial steps taking place over time in the development of social organizations in China.

Within China, one crucial driver of the formation and rapid rise of volunteering and voluntary organizations has been the problematization of workplace based welfare and the development of a market-based economy. Over the years, a growing reliance on community volunteers and NGOs for service provision in China has emerged (Hoffman 2013). The year 1998 is considered a watershed in the use of 'non state resources' for social services: the Chinese government passed the Provisional Regulation on the Registration and Management of Civilian-run Non-enterprise Units, which established a system by which NGOs could become officially registered social organizations. These regulations require groups to have a sponsoring institution within the government.

Through the establishment of a registration and sponsoring system, the state has constructed the notion of what an NGO is, defined its scope of activity and limited its autonomy (Ma 2002, p. 305; Hildebrand 2013, p. 36, among others). In 2003 a directive clarified that the state's role would shift from direct provider to policy maker and regulator for social welfare (Wong, Tang 2006-2007).

The year 2008 is conventionally considered the beginning of the phase of Chinese civil society organizations' development, a phase in which welfare-oriented NGOs rapidly started networking and going into partnership with the state (Franceschini 2014). This shift, far from implying that NGOs are allowed to take on a positive role in democratization, only specifies the boundaries of the space for social organizations in China. Many scholars have highlighted the limitations to which social organizations are subject in China. Hasmath and Hsu (2014), among others, maintain that the regulatory environment for NGOs in China contributes to maintaining social stability by keeping out those organizations that the government perceives as a threat. Franceschini (2014, p. 6) points out that from 2008 on, rights-oriented NGOs encountered an increasingly repressive political environment. Hoffman (2013, p. 848) argues that the space for social organizations specified by policies and directives «is not about the release of the people to be who they really are, but rather, is a process by which volunteerism emerges *through* the governmental technology of autonomy and practices of decentralization». De Kloet, Pak Lei Chong and Landsberger (2011, p. 39) point out that «becoming a volunteer was never something entirely 'voluntary'».

Xiang's and Yun's article advocating a reduction in the direct involvement of the Chinese government in domestic volunteering was published in 2006, that is shortly before the above-mentioned shifts took place in the field of volunteering. Their article should be understood as heralding the

imminent acceleration in transforming NGOs into partners of the Chinese state, and a more mediated state control over some types of programs.

Thus, in actual fact, a nexus between a growing involvement of social organizations and a reduced direct government control on voluntary work as beneficial for attaining the effects expected by the Chinese leadership within the national boundaries had already been highlighted back in the mid 2000s.

9 A Similar Pathway for International Volunteering?

More recently, a similar critical approach towards tight governmental control has emerged over the issue of Chinese international volunteering.

Chinese international volunteering is still in its early phase. In fact, as shown above, it was only in 2002 that international volunteering started to feature in Beijing's global activism.

At the same time, until recently the Chinese government's support for Chinese NGOs engaged in Sino-African relations has been rather limited. As opposed to the situation of social volunteering at the domestic level, Chinese international voluntary service is still under direct government control. Brenner (2012) argues that to work on critical issues relevant to Sino-African relations is exceptional for a Chinese NGO. Besides, as shown above, China has established highly selective volunteer recruitment procedures for international volunteering, with some local announcements requiring that the applicants be members of the CCP or the CYL. This amounts to a requirement of ideological conformity to the nation-state discourse even stricter than that required from volunteers active in China.

According to some influential scholars, China's top-down approach and tight control over international volunteering are among the main reasons why China's people-to-people diplomacy is experiencing bottlenecks and even failures. In fact, excessive direct governmental control makes the bureaucratic aspects of the exchange prevalent over direct involvement with the local communities and thus reduces the impact of the voluntary service. As a rule Chinese volunteers in African countries live in urban areas and mostly work in offices in the capital and lack real life experience and exchanges with the local society (Wang et al. 2012). Other writings suggest that people-to-people interactions at the grassroots level should be intensified (Li, Luo 2013).

The critical stance of certain scholars also focuses on the existing peculiar arrangements in the international volunteers' recruitment and exchange. In contrast to international volunteers from other countries that participate in voluntary work through programs developed by international volunteer agencies, within the China Foreign Aid Youth Volunteers Program, Chinese volunteers are sent out through official channels. Chinese

government's volunteers go to African countries only upon the signing of an agreement between the governments of China and the receiving African country and after governmental institutions in both countries have agreed on the specific implementation of the volunteer program.

Scholars point out that voluntary work does not benefit from such arrangements. For instance, South Africa is not used to having the government organize such exchanges and therefore is less likely to accept government-run volunteer missions from China (Wang et al. 2012). To counter such a situation, scholars suggest that the Chinese government reduce its direct involvement and control over volunteer service and entrust social organizations with the management of volunteering.

In sum, six years after Xiang's and Yun's critical stance on the issue of domestic volunteering, Wang and his colleagues (2012) discuss the involvement of NGOs as a remedy to too tight a state grip on international volunteering. Thus, at different moments, both Chinese scholars focusing on domestic voluntary work in mid 2000s and those analysing international volunteering in early 2010s highlight bottlenecks and shortcomings originating from a top-down approach to volunteering and a tight control of its implementation. In both cases, a more direct involvement of social organizations is suggested.

10 Tapping into a Previously Overlooked Resource

Chinese scholars warn that more and more young Chinese access volunteering in Africa through non-Chinese international NGOs. In fact, parallel to government-controlled international volunteering, a new international volunteering process has started in recent years with Chinese youngsters now participating in international programs managed by non-Chinese NGOs and social organizations. According to Li and Luo (2014, p. 38) «non-governmental volunteerism in Africa took place earlier than that of governmental participation». The authors cite as an example of this trend the approximately one hundred Chinese students assigned to some locations in Africa by the Development Aid from People to People (DAPP), a NGO with its headquarters in Denmark. Other sources show that growing numbers of Chinese students are recruited by other non-Chinese NGOs. For instance, starting in 2010, after the approval of the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Voluntary Service Overseas, a UK based organization, for the first time started recruiting volunteers from all over China to participate its global projects, with Africa as the main destination (China Development Brief 2011).

The China-Africa Project features an interview with Felicity Li, a Chinese student of Mathematics at Fudan University, Shanghai who in 2012

went to Ghana as a volunteer.¹³ As many other Chinese students, Felicity has been enrolled in a volunteer program run by AIESEC, a non-profit organization founded in Europe in 1948 and now active in 126 countries. The student explains that she decided to join AIESEC program in Africa after she received a promotional e-mail from the organization that was recruiting exchange participants:

I got a promotional letter in my university e-mail inbox saying, «Do you want to have the chance to do volunteer work abroad? You can go to Africa». It really attracted me because I had always wanted to go to Africa, and it would have been more meaningful to me if it were to be volunteer work instead of just traveling. So I just applied for it and I got in. (Musakwa 2013)

Thus, successful non-Chinese volunteering programs are becoming more and more popular among Chinese youngsters while the government-managed international volunteering program is seen as unable to meet the expected goals. These different outcomes, together with an urgency to reap the benefits of the last decade's public diplomacy efforts push influential scholars to argue that volunteering conducted through NGOs could be more effective than voluntary service directly controlled by Chinese state agencies. Wang and his colleagues (2012) suggest that contacts with NGOs rooted in Africa working directly with the local communities be established and they go as far as suggesting that the Chinese government entrusts to NGOs the entire management of the Program - including the recruitment, training and dispatch of volunteers -, with the government limiting itself to supervision of the Program. This call to delegate to carefully selected NGOs most of the steps in the management of Chinese volunteer service abroad, however, does not imply that political loyalty to the state's ideology is lost. The rationale behind this policy suggestion is to both give a new impetus to people-to-people diplomacy in Africa and to tap into the previously overlooked resource of growing numbers of Chinese youngsters eager to undertake volunteering abroad.

Precisely because these are the goals that Chinese international volunteering should reach, influential scholars have been undertaking a major overhaul of the dominant discourse on who is entitled to transmit Chinese dominant values abroad. Wang and his colleagues (2012) argue that the mission of being messengers of the Chinese culture should by no means only fall within officially sent volunteers' prerogatives, and instead claim that volunteers sent by NGOs can also transmit the Chinese *Weltanschauung*

13 The China Africa Project is a multimedia resource dedicated to exploring different aspects of China's growing engagement with Africa.

to the communities where they work. Thus, they raise the issue of public diplomacy through international volunteering as a task that can be carried out also by ordinary people who are not recruited by government's agencies and whose political compliance is not directly controlled by Beijing. A new approach is therefore set against the assumption previously implicitly dominant in government bodies: that the Chinese mainstream world view as embodied in the cultural norms elaborated by those in power is internalized also by those Chinese over whom the government and the party have not secured a direct organisational and ideological grip.

In short, the article by Wang, Huang and Liu questions the prevailing double isomorphism according to which international voluntary service has to be coupled with full conformity to the official ideology, and that this conformity is only to be found in volunteers selected by government bodies or 'mass organizations' directly controlled by the Party.

11 Chinese Scholars as Heralds of Ongoing Shifts in International Volunteering

The important shift advocated by the Chinese authors amounts to a process of popularization of the non-state modes of addressing crucial issues through the involvement of NGOs at the international level. However, far from implying that the state grants free rein to social organizations active at the international level, this approach intends NGOs to be tools to aid the pursuit of China's global strategic goals. This amounts to devising a policy for international aid similar to the policies adopted within China where, as shown above, non-governmental or social organizations have been given an instrumental role of aiding the pursuit of «socialism with Chinese characteristics» (Lee 2009, p. 354) and where NGOs joining with the state in service provision had been promoted and implemented.

The new approach suggested by scholarly articles is clearly interwoven with the Chinese government's changing strategy towards Africa.

Back in 2009, in the closing communiqué of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the Chinese government had already stated its intention to promote NGO's involvement in Sino-African relations (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2009). By 2012, NGOs mass engagement in voluntary work in Africa had become one of the components of a more comprehensive new set of policies aimed at strengthening people-to-people contacts and calling for greater interactions between non-official Chinese and African actors, also including exchanges between universities and think tanks, educational and training initiatives for Africans in China, and China-Africa media cooperation in a media environment historically dominated by the West (FOCAC 2012; Hanauer, Morris 2014). Cultural and People-to-People

Exchanges and Cooperation is one of the new sections of what President Hu Jintao (2012) at the 2012 FOCAC referred to as a «new type of China-Africa strategic partnership» also including issues such as health aid, sustainability and security.

With this new approach, the China-Africa People's Forum was launched in 2011 to enhance exchanges between African and Chinese NGOs. The Second China-Africa People's Forum became one associate event officially incorporated into the 2012 FOCAC. In that occasion it was argued that NGOs should play a critical role in China-Africa relations «if the growing economic ties between China and Africa were to be steered towards addressing the critical needs of grassroots Africa» (NGOs in Africa 2012).

In 2012 the role of NGOs in Sino-African ties started featuring in the African press. According to one article, interestingly entitled «Africa: NGOs Advocate Balance in Sino-African Ties» (2012), many of the African participants in the China-Africa People Forum in 2012 asked whether China activism in Africa could soon «be steered towards addressing the critical needs of grassroots Africa and ensure that Africans get real value for money in the support it is receiving from China to develop its economies».

In 2012 and 2013, other articles, also published in *Dangdai shijie*, echoed the critical assessment of the implementation of existing international volunteering policy and advocated a shift in the leadership's approach (Huang et al. 2013a, Women de jianyi, 2013).

Within China's new soft power approach to Africa, Chinese scholars' plea that NGOs and ordinary Chinese people can also be activists in people-to-people diplomacy is more easily understood. By acknowledging that people-to-people interactions are an important and underutilized mechanism that can complement government-to-government exchanges, in fact, Beijing makes room for an enhanced role for both Chinese international volunteers and NGOs within which growing numbers of ordinary citizens could access voluntary service in Africa. Such an arrangement offers competitive advantages if compared with the previous voluntary work provided through more official channels. In fact, at least in principle, NGOs can both cover issues now ranking high on the China-Africa agenda such as health aid and sustainability and at the same time provide the context where people-to-people diplomacy can be easily carried out. As a result, China's people-to-people diplomacy in Africa could be more effective and more visible.

With this new strategic approach, new perspectives and an enormous space for Chinese NGOs action abroad has started taking shape.

12 First Steps Along the New Pathway?

Going to Africa is now recognized as the first step for Chinese NGOs to go abroad (Meng, Sun 2013). While there are no official statistics on the number of Chinese NGOs active in Africa, He (2013) points out that «at the end of 2013, fewer than ten NGOs from the Chinese mainland have expanded abroad». According to other estimates, there are more than 100 Chinese NGOs operating in Africa, ten of which have permanent operations and local offices in Africa (Liu 2013).

By 2013, Liu Hongwu, dean of the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University, could claim that increased grassroots engagement of Chinese NGOs in Africa was already giving «a new dimension and perspective to what Africa and the rest of the world thinks about China» (Liu 2013).¹⁴

However, it is mainly government-organized NGOs (GONGOs) that have the capacity to expand their operations beyond China (Brenner 2012).¹⁵ In fact, the most mentioned Chinese organizations active in Africa are well-known GONGOs such as the Red Cross Society of China, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviations, and the Chinese Youth Development Foundation (Meng, Sun 2013). According to pioneer research, a two-track process is emerging, with GONGOS engaging in large-scale development projects and smaller NGOs focusing on projects where they have proven expertise (Brenner 2012).¹⁶ This is a still mostly untapped field of research, where fieldwork is needed.

While in the framework of the 2012's FOCAC Beijing's policy makers have earnestly sought a new approach to international voluntary service, it is still unclear how and to what extent the procedures of sending Chinese volunteers to Africa have actually changed. There is no evidence of a drastic departure from previous decision-making procedures, just as

¹⁴ Together with Shen Beili, Liu Hongwu is the editor of the 2009 book *Feizhou fei zhengfu zuzhi yu zhongfei guanxi* (The African NGOs and Sino-African Relations). According to MqVU (2010), the book is intended as a reference for Chinese policy-makers. In the book it is argued that African NGOs have a negative influence on China-Africa relations and that they might weaken China's soft power and erode the basis of China-Africa cooperation. The authors recommend that the Chinese government reach out to African NGOs and suggest that selected NGOs should be invited to carry out inspections of the management of Chinese companies in Africa.

¹⁵ Unlike NGOs, GONGOs are established by a government institution and are only quasi non-governmental. GONGOs fulfil roles within Chinese policy-making and policy implementation that cannot be performed by the state itself. However, some GONGOs, after gaining extensive professional networks to international NGOs and donors, have become integral stakeholders able to influence policy and legislation. For an overview of Chinese NGOs and GONGOs in Sino-African relations see Brenner 2012.

¹⁶ These are also the findings of *From Domestic to International: The Evolution of Chinese NGO*, ongoing research presented by Jennifer Hsu at the AAS Annual Conference (2014).

there is no evidence that recruitment and management of volunteers is now mainly being trusted to Chinese NGOs.

As discussed above, the government-controlled recruiting channel has not been abolished. The article «Chinese Young Volunteers Head for Africa» (2014) shows that the Youth League is still recruiting volunteers: a group of 12 young volunteers selected by the Youth League and the Chinese Young Volunteers Association was sent to Ethiopia in August 2014.

This thus seems to be a transition period, with the Chinese government envisaging the merging of the government-to-government mode of international volunteer aid with NGO-managed international volunteering (see for instance Elinaza 2014). Precisely because it is a transition period, other modes of exploiting the potential for volunteering in Africa are tentatively envisaged. For instance, Liu in 2013 (p. 7) stated that «hundreds of teachers are also in Africa teaching Chinese. These overseas students and language teachers have a good knowledge of the local community and some are willing to work and live in Africa on a long-term basis. They are a crucial driving force for Chinese NGOs in Africa». While this approach shows that there is not a clear distinction between volunteers and language teachers sent within specific programs such as the Confucius Institute, it is possible that China intends to tap into the resource of people who have already spent some time in Africa and to offer them the position of long-term volunteers working for those Chinese NGOs that have started operating in African countries.¹⁷

That China's international volunteering is now undergoing a transition period where alternative approaches are taken into consideration, also emerges from the different stances taken by outstanding personalities on the issue of control over Chinese NGOs active in Africa. In 2012, speaking of cooperation between African and Chinese NGOs, Zhu Ming, of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies stated: «Frankly speaking, the non-state actors of Africa and China are still not strong enough to carry out effective mutual cooperation. There is still a long road ahead» (Zhu 2012, p. 23). One year later, Liu Hongwu (2013, p. 7) warned that a more grassroots approach, while needed, is conducive to a diversification of the interests and objectives of Chinese NGOs in Africa and that this in turn could collide with China's national strategy in Africa. He argued that the «new challenge will be how to guide these NGOs to prevent such a collision».

Thus, a tension remains among Chinese policy-makers and intellectuals between the push to strengthen the internationalization of domestic NGOs on the one hand, and on the other hand fears of state control being lost once the firm grip is relaxed. The existing tension shows that the Chinese

17 Confucius institutes have recently come under significant critique worldwide (Leung, Du Cros 2014, Scarpari 2015).

government is facing, and trying to somehow reconcile, «the contradictions of participation and control» (Germani 1970, quoted in Yan 2014, p. 18). This is the very same contradiction being faced by the Chinese leadership with NGOs at the domestic level (on this contradiction within China see Yan 2014). Once again, then, dilemmas that had emerged in the national arena in China present themselves again when China tries to reassess its international volunteer policy and the modes of its implementation. Fieldwork research could verify which patterns and mechanisms will prevail in China's international volunteering in Africa.

13 Implications of the New Role for NGOs in China's International Volunteer Strategies

The interaction between the state and NGOs has become a salient subject of interest in the last years.

A growing number of scholars focusing on NGOs active in China point out that social organizations should not necessarily be considered a progressive force for political change. Focusing on labour NGOs, Franceschini (2014) challenges the idea of NGOs as grassroots organizations through which Chinese people take part in public affairs and collectively form a more participatory citizenship. Rather, scholars increasingly point out that not only the central state is actively involved in the development of NGOs but also, increasingly, the successes of NGOs are determined by their interactions with the state (Hsu, Hasmath 2014). Thus, most NGOs are, in essence, a bridge between state and society (Ma 2002): they work for the Party-state to which they adhere, minimize social conflict, improve the government's image in the eyes of the general public (Hildebrand 2013, p. 167) and thus increase the legitimacy of the state and help the Party to maintain its power. In particular, government organized NGOs (GONGOs) and mass organizations are regarded as the social arm of the Party-state, «given that the state has actively created these institutions to ensure a bridge between state and society» (Hsu, Hasmath 2014).

Against such a background, the direct involvement of Chinese social organizations in international volunteering is to be intended as modelled on the state-NGOs relational mode existing within China. This emerges clearly from the scholarly writings analysed in this article. Far from promoting a retreat of the state from international development volunteering, the academics urge to promote a new mode of governance is still in relation to the state apparatus. They suggest that this step should be intended as «going to sea by borrowing a boat» (*jie chuan chu hai*). This is a fashionable slogan in China, used to describe tactics aimed at taking advantage of other countries' facilities. Quoting a 2006 confidential report by the European

Studies Team, Liu (2008) points out that this was the slogan adopted by the Confucius Institutes in Europe for describing the cooperative model consisting in taking advantage of other countries' campuses and management. This was considered the best choice for the Chinese government as it could spend the least money and gain the most influence.

The shift away from previous international volunteering policies and modes of policy implementation and the drive towards a stronger involvement of NGOs in volunteering both at the domestic and the international level clearly originate from the Chinese leadership. For instance, it was the Central Committee of the CYL who launched and managed the Western China University Graduate Volunteer Teaching Program in the 2000s (Xiang, Yun 2006), and it was the CYL of Heilongjiang University that provided financial support for Xiang's and Yun's research and article highlighting shortcomings in volunteer participation in that program and suggesting a more direct involvement by social organizations. By the same token, Wang's and his colleagues' (2012) plea for moving away from the existing Chinese policy on volunteering and its modes of implementation and making room for the participation of NGOs in China's international volunteer initiatives, as well as other articles directly or indirectly supporting this shift, has appeared in a CCP-sponsored journal.

Focusing on Chinese NGOs active in China, Hsu and Hasmath argue that the Chinese state has now adopted a strategy «of tacit sanctioning whereby the state creates and mediates the 'space' in which NGOs can operate» (Hasmath, Hsu 2014, p. 936).

Lisa Hoffman (2013), drawing on Foucault, considers the emergency of volunteering in Chinese cities and the practices of 'local autonomy' as technologies for governing the urban space.¹⁸

Building on these conceptualizations, a tentative conclusion can be put forward: that the practices of enhancing the role of non-governmental agencies in Chinese international voluntary service far from implying less state governance should be considered as technologies for governing development volunteering in the way that best serves Chinese economic interests and soft power strategies. Chinese international volunteers included in selected NGOs aid programs are being activated to step into spaces previously dominantly occupied by the centrally organized provision of development aid because they can more easily give shape to the Chinese government policy of reinforcement of people-to-people diplomacy. This conclusion requires further research in order to unpack the various elements that make up the new modes through which China governs international voluntary service.

18 Foucault (2000) contends that neoliberal governmentability is not about the retreat of the State; rather it is a restructuring of power relations in society.

14 Conclusions

Beijing is carefully tending its international image.

Scholars increasingly agree that aid represents the main tool of China's soft power strategy in Africa. The Chinese leadership pays particular attention to use aid as a tool of diplomacy and an instrument to meet political, strategic, and economic goals (Brautigam 2008, pp. 201-202). Nonetheless, recent research shows that domestic politics also plays a critical role in shaping China's aid to Africa and affects its effectiveness (see Huang 2014).

The Chinese engagement in international aid through volunteering is a recent development and is still very limited in scope. However, the lively internal debate on shortcomings and future perspectives for Chinese international voluntary service shows that this is one of the fields playing and bound to play an ever more crucial role within China's soft power strategy towards Africa.

By documenting and analysing the growing significance China attaches to youth volunteering, this article argues that international volunteer programs emerged under the initiative of the government as an integral part of the PRC foreign diplomacy aimed at enhancing China's public appeal abroad (especially in Africa). It contends that the Youth Volunteer Overseas Service Program in many respects represents an expansion of the system, policies and approaches that have been at work at the domestic level. Recently, international volunteering has been the object of an internal debate that sheds light on dilemmas and blind spots of the Chinese voluntary service in Africa, and on the choices currently being made by Beijing.

What emerges from the vast literature on Chinese NGOs active in China is that, also as a remedy to policy failures (Hsu 2014), a process of popularization of non-state modes of addressing crucial domestic issues has developed through bringing together the state and social organizations and the growing involvement of volunteers in social work.

It is argued here that similar conditions and needs at the international level are now opening up a similar pathway of state-NGOs relations at the international level: as much as policy failures and the partial withdrawal of the state from the provision of some services have heavily contributed to create, within the national borders, the space in which selected NGOs could operate, policy failure in the international volunteering program has more recently created the conditions for the emergence of a space and subjects for a non-state mode of implementation in international volunteering. Selected Chinese GONGOs and NGOs are now being activated to occupy this space. Thus, far from prefiguring a retreat of the state in favour of grass-root organizations, this shift is intended as the best way to implement Chinese government soft power strategy in Africa.

Further, the paper shows that influential Chinese intellectuals have acted as catalysts of the drive to change the international volunteer service

policy and its modes of implementation, and as heralds of the crucial shifts in volunteering both at the domestic and international levels.

Chinese NGOs are now perceived as vital to the efficacy and successful implementation of the central state's policies in pursuit of effective public diplomacy that enhances Chinese soft power reach. NGOs can in fact help reaching local communities in the recipient countries and this can, according to the Chinese analysts, enhance the impact of volunteer action and more easily bring about the attainment of Chinese goals.

The tension between control and participation in the ongoing debate on international volunteer initiatives highlights the existing challenges to the Chinese state's capability to maintain a coherence among, and direct the multitude of Chinese actors engaging in international volunteer initiatives.¹⁹

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