Intimate Utopias: anti-politics in Chinese civil society

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Abstract

Can civil society offer alternative modes of sociality in an authoritarian political regime? Drawing on a study on small "voluntary fellowships" in China, we explore the anti-political values of a specific type of group whose members share a moral code of "civic intimacy" that values an idealized social condition of free, pure and caring social relations, and dream of achieving this utopian condition not through political activism but through the immediate realization of authentic relations of emotional intimacy. Thus, we offer the case of "intimate utopias" as an invitation to question a normative framework prevalent in discourses on civil society that privileges the political consciousness and activism of voluntary associations and ignores or dismisses other motivations and modes of sociality. We draw on Alexander's Civil Sphere Theory to analyze the moral codes of small groups seen as micro-civil spheres, in which the group builds its identity by expressing, enacting and maintaining its boundaries against a "profane" world of instrumental and political social relations. Our materials lead us to propose a model of Chinese civil sphere dynamics that is diffuse, pluralistic, and centrifugal.

Keywords Volunteerism · Utopia · Intimacy · Civil society · China

Introduction

Can civil society offer alternative modes of sociality in an authoritarian political regime? In the neo-Tocquevillian paradigm of civil society, civil society lays the social foundation for an end to authoritarianism (Edwards 2014). Thus, to the extent that an associational civil society exists, authoritarianism will retreat and democracy will advance; or, conversely, authoritarianism will expand, crushing civil society or restricting its development. Although this thesis has been widely challenged

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(Alagappa 2004; Alexander 2006b; Spires 2011), until now most research on civil society in China and Asia continues to share implicit neo-Tocquevillian assumptions, albeit more cautiously (Setiawan & Spires 2021; Weiss 2021). But the case of China makes these assumptions increasingly untenable: over the past three decades, the Peoples' Republic of China has seen a vast growth of civic and voluntary associations, and yet, there has been no evolution in the direction of increased liberal democracy.

There are several possible answers to this puzzle. Holding onto the neo-Tocquevillian paradigm, one might claim that Chinese voluntary associations do not form a "true" civil society. Or, one might argue that civil society groups are *constrained* within China's authoritarian system, forcing them to temporarily and opportunistically avoid tensions. Thus, Chinese civil society has not *yet* succeeded in advancing democratic liberties: because there is *not enough* or *authentic* civil society (Junge 2012), because the state has *blocked* its development, or its democratizing effect *will be felt in the future* after it will have surmounted those obstacles (see Gallagher 2004, 421). In this frame, the cause is to be located externally, in the state: if the state were only to reduce or relax its restrictions, civil society groups would rise up and follow their natural tendency to promote more widespread social engagement and advocacy, thereby pushing back against authoritarianism—and groups that do not follow this natural tendency do not truly count as "civil society." Much of the literature on civil society in China implicitly or explicitly offers some version of this frame, seeking to map the precise locations of state restrictions and to identify the groups, locations or movements where state and civil society push against or negotiate with each other.

A full rejection of the neo-Tocquevillian paradigm, on the other hand, leads one to conclude that either (1) civil society can *replicate* or *reinforce* authoritarian hegemony (Riley 2005); or that (2) civil society, for many people, is a realm of *alternative modes of sociality* that exist within the authoritarian political structure without directly challenging it. In the Chinese case, the former approach is exemplified by Palmer and Winiger (2019), who have built on Foucaultian frames to conceptualize the role of social associations in China's "neo-socialist governmentality."

However, these broad strokes, if taken too far, risk blinding us to the sociological significance of civic groups in China. In this article, we take the second stance, drawing on a study of volunteers in China to focus on alternative moral codes and practices of solidarity created and maintained by voluntary groups. We identify a specific type of voluntary fellowship in which participants seek to create "intimate utopias" characterized by intimate, equal, and authentic relationships. The sociological significance of the "civic intimacy" cherished by this type of group is threefold: first, it points to the search for idealized modes of sociality that are distinct from those of the classic social spheres of family, work, friendships, religion, and politics. Second, it points to a mode of sociality that aims to be autonomous from the constraints of Chinese neo-socialist governance, even as it is deeply shaped by it and arguably reinforces it. Third, this valuing of intimate relationships among civil society participants, especially among volunteers, cuts across a wide range of associations with different aims, be they devoted to education, sports, traditional culture or disaster relief. Thus, the concept of "civic intimacy" is fundamental to understand

the persistence and popularity of civil society groups in China. It also shows the importance of examining the internal moral codes of civil society groups in addition to their interfaces with the state.

We begin by reviewing studies of Chinese civil society, showing that this literature has consistently remained within a state-centered frame, even as the empirical reality has forced researchers to considerably nuance or complexify the frame. We then explain what we mean by civic intimacy and its utopian dimension, and outline our theoretical framework, based on the notions of "micro-civil spheres" and "moral codes" derived from Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology (Alexander 2006a; Palmer 2019). Next, we draw on interviews with volunteers in a wide range of groups and contexts to identify the moral code of civic intimacy. We then focus on the narratives of volunteers in four groups whose values exemplify this moral code of solidarity. This leads us to a deeper examination of some leading volunteers' emic theorizations of civic intimacy. We then consider other forms of anti-politics in China and elsewhere. In conclusion, our materials lead us to propose a model of Chinese civil sphere dynamics that is diffuse, pluralistic, and centrifugal. Rather than a single civil society contesting the state, we see a dispersed plurality of evanescent micro-civil spheres, that are spaces for expressing different values of solidarity and for negotiating boundaries with other social spheres, including but not exclusively the political sphere. In this dynamic configuration, anti-politics is a means for negotiating boundaries between a sphere of authentic solidarity and one defined by a logic of political co-optation or confrontation.

The state vs civil society frame

The neo-Tocquevillian perspective applied to the Chinese context has led scholarship to focus primarily on interfaces between the state and civil society groups, such as state regulation and management of social groups, and NGO negotiations and activism with state actors. Research and discourse on civil society tend to ignore how people relate *to each other* in these associations, creating and remaining active in civil society by forming a distinct sphere of social relations.

The problem with this neo-Tocquevillian paradigm was posed and debated in early discussions on civil society in China, which emerged in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism in Eastern Europe (Rowe 1993; Rankin 1993; Huang 1993).While state-group relationships were a key concern in these early studies (Foster 2001; Kang and Han 2008; Unger 2008; Zhang and Baum 2008; Ma 2002), some authors already noted that civil society shouldn't be seen as a counter-structure, but as an alternative structure which is distinct from state and society while a creature of both (Madsen 1993). However, more recent research on Chinese NGOs still revolves around their relationship with the state (Hsu 2016; Saich 2000; Zhang 2018; Dai & Spires 2018; Hsu & Jiang 2015; Spires 2011; Xu 2017; Hasmath et al. 2019; Yuen 2018; Liu and Palmer 2020).

In spite of the literature's high level of sensitivity to the subtle dynamics at play, most studies have been primarily devoted to understanding the relationships between social associations and the state. We suggest that this question and its answers,

important as they are, are not all the only thing that matters for the study of civil society in China. For us, an equally important question is, "what are the alternative modes of solidarity created or promised by civil society groups? And how do they relate to other social spheres?" In this article, we hope to address these issues by looking at the ideals of interpersonal relationships within civil society groups. And, as we will argue in the conclusion to this paper, this question applies not only in authoritarian contexts, but in liberal ones too.

The moral code of civic intimacy within micro-civil spheres

By "civic intimacy," we refer to an expectation of volunteers that relationships among themselves should be simple, close, authentic, pure, and egalitarian. Sociological studies of intimacy often focus on the intimacy between romantic love partners or family members (Giddens 1992; Gross 2005). Here, however, we take a broader definition of intimacy, which emphasizes a more general, non-sexual emotional closeness (Jamieson 2011; Sehlikoglu and Zengin 2015), outside of family and close friends (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Plummer 2010). The intimacy the volunteers pursued and experienced in our study is emotional rather than bodily or sexual (Sum 2017). Intimacy between Chinese volunteers takes place in settings more similar to workplaces than families, though they might live together and collaborate on many living activities like cooking and sleeping in shared dormitories. The intimacy in our study is focused more on relationships in volunteer work: thus we call it *civic* intimacy. In other words, working together with trust, freedom, and equality characterizes the moral code of intimacy among volunteers. It is more akin to close collegiality and comradeship. The socialist hue of comradeship is intended here, as some of our interlocutors do miss what they remember or imagine as the warmth of interpersonal relationships during the revolutionary era, and try to recreate it among volunteer groups. We thus use the term "civic intimacy" to designate a specific type of moral code, in which small-scale groups of volunteers hope to nurture and maintain open, casual, trustworthy, cooperative relationships among themselves, which they distinguish, through their moral code, from the traditional, instrumental and politicized modes of interpersonal relationships outside the volunteer circle—whether in the spheres of the family, the economy, or politics.

We characterize the moral code of civic intimacy as utopian, because it represents an ideal that is difficult to expand to other, more dominant spheres of social life. Our choice of the term "utopia" follows sociologists who invite us to examine the utopian dimension of many contemporary cultural and social movements (Alexander 2001; Levitas 2013; Wright 2010), which contain an explicit or implicit vision of a better society. Alexander (2001) has stressed that the collapse of Marxism (in the West) did not bring about the end of utopianism, but only the end of radical and totalizing utopias. The utopian impulse that has animated movements for spiritual or social reform throughout history continues today, but in a pluralistic form, in which different groups have more modest goals, as "limited utopias". In a similar vein, but in a more extreme fashion, the social spaces the Chinese volunteers create are

modest, experimental, and improvisational, but they carry an implicit imagination of an ideal type of community.

As our data shows, the participants of these spaces know that the intimacy they seek and maintain is rare outside their volunteer fellowships. They maintain a separation between these fellowships and the realms of family, work, friendships, and politics. The volunteers' utopia is an evanescent intimacy that has never fully existed in the past, whether in the ascribed relations of traditional society, the revolutionary duties of the Mao era, or in the instrumental relations and ritualistic political performances of the post-Mao era (Palmer & Winiger 2019). At the same time, the volunteers do not envision a program for the future: once there is a program, one needs to start creating a formal institution, adopt some kind of instrumental rationality for the achievement of that program, and increase one's level of tension with the state. A small number of our interviewees did suggest a vision of a future society characterized by civic intimacy, but they insisted that such a vision could not be achieved in an organized fashion. There is thus an eschewing of thinking too far in terms of a utopian *project*. And the intimate utopia has little institutional space in the present: to the extent that these groups are under pressure to institutionalize, the members consider that institutionalization violates the moral code of civic intimacy. Thus, the utopias created by the volunteers are radical in that they actually exist nowhere, other than, through glimpses, in the intimacy of the relations between themselves.

The *anti-political* nature of the volunteer's orientation is also utopian in the Chinese context, in the sense that the volunteers seek to create spaces free from politics and engagement with the state—a dream that can only be achieved in moments of intimacy, and is extremely difficult to sustain. This has two consequences: on the one hand, in line with critiques of anti-political orientations (Truffelli & Zambernardi 2021), these groups do not challenge or restrain the authoritarian regime. On the other hand, this anti-politics is more than apathy or opportunistic adaptation, and expresses deep values. The groups are not mere instruments or passive followers of the regime; they embody strongly held, socially enacted alternatives to the dominant order of social relations. Under this style of civic action (Lichterman & Eliasoph 2014), volunteers express strong civil values of solidarity, fellowship, equality, freedom and cooperation, and they seek the authenticity of these values in the intimate relations of the present, rather than in any plan to reform society or engage with the government, whether by aligning with state goals or by engaging in activism. This type of "utopia" seeks to realize ideal relations of freedom and solidarity that are in deep tension with those that prevail in other social, economic and political spheres, but has no broad plan or vision to change the conditions of society. While the "intimate utopia" can be interpreted as a specifically Chinese style of civic action adapted to neo-socialist governance rooted in a long history of authoritarianism (Palmer & Winiger 2019), it also embodies an anti-political moral ideal: groups that believe in idealized, free and pure social relations as an intrinsic value (see also Yan 2009a), and dream of achieving this utopian condition not through ideology, abstract principles, activism, plans or strategies, but through the immediate realization of authentic relations of emotional intimacy. The pro-social dimensions of these forms of association and civic action force us to revise the neo-Tocquevillian thesis: civil society can contribute to the expression of civic values and action in different

socio-political systems by providing spaces of civic solidarity that are not bound to a normative ideal of a present or future liberal democratic order.

The ideal of civic intimacy evokes the distinction made by Tönnies (2001[1887]) between "community" or *gemeinschaft* and "civil society" or *gesellschaft*; in which *gemeinshaft* is a community based on the personalized, emotional bonds of the agrarian village communities of rural Germany, where people were depicted as having natural, authentic, emotional ties with each other. Tönnies contrasted this with *gesellschaft*, characterized by contractual associations based on mutual self-interest and instrumental rationality. Within Tönnies' definition of civil society, what defines modern NGOs and formal civil society associations is their nature as associations of people who unite for a specific goal and legally constitute themselves and register with the state (or attempt to do so) in the pursuit of that goal. Whether they are state, business or civic groups, all *gesellschaft* organizations are organized by principles of instrumental rationality. They rationally define their interests, and pursue instrumental means to attain their interests. When their interests clash, they engage in negotiations with each other.

The moral code of the Chinese groups we present here, however, embodies values that, to varying degrees, reject the instrumental rationality of the institutionalized associations and seek to create what Tönnies called a "fellowship" in contrast to an "association" of rational-instrumental actors (Tönnies 2001[1887], pp. 233–234). They share affinities with Tönnies' own suspicion of the Hobbesian, atomistic and conflictual underpinnings of social relations in liberal societies based on instrumental rationality. But while Tönnies defines the fellowship as a "natural product" of the traditional, particularistic *gemeinschaft*, what we find here is a "voluntary fellowship" that is made up of previously unconnected individuals who associate in a purely voluntary matter, while consciously eschewing instrumental rationality. The yearning for this type of fellowship can be seen as a product of the increasing individualization in contemporary Chinese society.

To analyze these ideals and the attempts to put them into practice, we draw on Alexander's theory of civil spheres (Alexander 2006a). Jeffrey Alexander's cultural sociology of the civil sphere focuses on how moral codes and performances enact boundaries between a "sacred" collective space of civil values of solidarity, and a "profane" world of anti-civil values, institutions and people. Alexander reminds us, in the opening page of *The Civil Sphere,* that "societies are not governed by power alone and are not fueled only by the pursuit of self-interest. Feelings for others matter, and they are structured by the boundaries of solidarity. How solidarity is structured, how far it extends, what it's composed of—these are critical issues for every social order…" (Alexander 2006a: 3).

Alexander's theory focuses on the civil sphere at the national level, which he defines as "a solidary sphere, in which a certain kind of universalising community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced" (2006a, p. 31). Given the lack of institutional protection for such a civil society in the legal system, journalism and independent associations, Palmer (2019, p. 127) has argued that "strictly speaking, there is no civil sphere, as defined by Alexander, in mainland China." However, he shows that "micro-civil spheres" do exist in China, in which small groups and organizations express and negotiate moral codes

of solidarity in the relations between members as well as with the surrounding social actors. In small groups taken as micro-civil spheres, moral codes sacralize what the group believes to be positive civil values of solidarity, and draw boundaries against what the group sees as polluting, anti-civil values. In small groups seen as micro-civil spheres, the group structures itself by expressing, enacting and maintaining its boundaries against a "profane" world of non-civil or anti-civil values.

Building on this line of analysis, this article focuses on the moral codes of civic intimacy within small volunteer groups taken as micro-civil spheres. As argued by Fine and Harrington (2004), small groups provide a local interaction context, which are the micro foundations of civil society. They are the cause, the context, and the consequence of civil engagement. The core of each group discussed here consists of a dozen or more highly committed volunteers, aided by sometimes significantly larger numbers of short-term volunteers. Some of the groups have a handful of paid full-time staff, whose bare subsistence salary (compared to what they could be earning had they continued their professional career) qualifies them as volunteers as well.

The cases we discuss in this article do not claim to be representative of all voluntary groups in China. Many organizations are solidly integrated with the party-state structure, while others consciously push the boundaries of what is allowable, raising tensions with the state. Rather, the voluntary fellowship is but one of a broad variety of group styles (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2006) that can be found in China's associational world. Our research, by foregrounding Chinese volunteers' pursuit of intimate relationships, illustrates one way among others in which Chinese civic groups exist in an authoritarian political regime without explicitly pushing for greater freedoms, even as they uphold strong prosocial civic values of community engagement and solidarity.

Methodology

Data for this article are drawn from a research project on "Volunteering in China: Moral Discourses and Social Spaces".[1] The first author conducted participant observation on the daily practice of volunteering in the "Hong School" for migrant children in Beijing for four months in 2012 and 2013, updated by a follow-up interview with one of its main leaders in 2020. The second author and his research assistants conducted 58 group interviews with 156 volunteers in various organizations in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu, most of which took place between 2009 and 2012. These included volunteers organized by the Communist Party Youth League and the Ministry of Civil Affairs; volunteers placed in social service organizations by a multinational NGO modeled on a temp agency; groups inspired by Christian, Buddhist, or Confucian values; a variety of groups of university students engaged in educational activities; groups engaged in post-disaster relief following

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[1] For other aspects of this study, see Palmer and Winiger (2019), Ning and Palmer (2020), Palmer and Ning (2020).

the Sichuan earthquake of 2008; and an activist group. This long-term and multi-sited approach allows us to see the temporal consistency and wide geographical relevance of the moral code of civic intimacy and its relationship with anti-politics in Chinese civil society. Out of this wide range of groups, we have selected four cases to illustrate the moral code of civic intimacy: the "Hong School"; the "Dandelion" youth group; the "Heart to Heart" post-quake educational relief group; and the "Righteous Academy" Confucian association. The second author also supervised an M. Phil thesis on the "Dandelion" group (Peng 2017) and an undergraduate research project on the group by one of its founders (Wang 2013).[2]

We have reconstructed the moral codes of volunteers by identifying the following types of statements from our interview transcripts: explicit statements of moral values; contrasting statements, in which interviewees define the difference between volunteering and other types of activity; and statements on positive and negative volunteering experiences, through which moral codes can be inferred. In some cases, we also draw on online testimonials and materials posted by volunteers or their organizations. Ethnographic observation of activities and interactions in some of the groups has further allowed us to observe the interactional contexts in which these moral codes are expressed and enacted.

By "moral code", we follow Alexander in referring to a set of moral values that form a symbolic binary, in which one set of values represents the "pure" and "civil", in contrast to an opposite set of counter-values that are devalued as "polluting" and "uncivil" (Alexander 2006a, b, pp. 54–56). This moral code defines the symbolic boundaries between the moral identity of the group and what it rejects as representing different or opposing values. The moral code of "civic intimacy" refers to a set of values that are explicitly or implicitly articulated by group members, and that are contrasted to what they reject as the instrumental, political, "formalistic", "complicated" or "impure" nature of social relationships outside of their own group.

Basic elements of the moral code of civic intimacy can be found to varying degrees among the wide range of groups we studied. For volunteers in many of the groups, values of civic intimacy were present, but they were often mixed in or overshadowed by other values or considerations. On the other hand, in the four groups we selected to present in this article, the values of civic intimacy are more salient—in terms of the passion with which these values were articulated, or the efforts that went into putting those values into practice, sometimes at the cost of significant personal sacrifice, leading us to call these groups "intimate utopias". Thus, we have selected them as representative cases.

Three of the four groups selected for this article were in a legal and regulatory "grey zone." They were neither fully incorporated into state management structures, nor were they designated as illegal groups targeted for repression—they operated in

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[2] Names of organizations and interviewees have been anonymized. The second author interviewed the core members of Heart-to-Heart group in Mianzhu (Sichuan) in June 2010. He also conducted interviews and ethnographic observation in Beijing with members of the Righteous Academy in Aug. 2008, Mar.–April 2010, Aug. 2010 and Jan. 2016. Both authors conducted interviews and ethnographic research with members of the Dandelion group in Guangzhou in July 2013 and September 2014, respectively.

a grey area of official tolerance. The majority of informal or semi-formal grassroots associations in China are likely to fall in this category. Groups in the grey zone try to remain in a "safe space", sufficiently distant from the state so as to avoid excessive regulation, but without crossing certain lines that would attract troubles, interference or repression from state authorities. Even the Dandelion group, which was fully registered, showed the same tendency (Peng 2017, pp. 132–147). While the grey zone is intrinsically precarious, its low level of institutionalization means that it is a space within which civil society actors can potentially be creative in generating alternative modes of social relations.

The four volunteer groups and their moral codes of civic intimacy

Group 1: The Hong School for migrant children

Our first case is a migrant children's school in the northern suburbs of Beijing.[3] It had been run commercially since the late 1990s before it was taken over by a volunteer, Bu Hong, in late 2010, who since then served as its principal until 2018. Following the takeover by Bu, the school was run like an NGO, offering education to students ineligible for enrollment in public schools owing to the lack of an urban household registration or other necessary documents. During the first author's fieldwork from May to August 2013, this school had around ten full-time or regular volunteers, some ten full-time teachers, and more than 500 students ranging from the first grade of primary school to the second year of junior high school.

As it had gradually established its reputation as a well-functioning school, it gained much media exposure. It collaborated with a major reality show in China, large Chinese and foreign companies, and other organizations for social welfare and corporate social responsibility activities. Such collaboration reflected that, for a while, it had gained recognition from a wide range of actors and was not in an existentially precarious condition as in its early years. And yet, it never gained any form of official governmental recognition, such as a license for a school or NGO. Indeed, at the beginning of the research, Bu had several times rejected the first author's application for conducting research at the Hong School, explicitly citing his concern with the unnecessary attention from the government that such research might bring to the school.

Generally, the school had a convivial atmosphere; the volunteer teachers loved to teach in their own idiosyncratic style. There was a marked contrast between the atmosphere in the morning, during which paid teachers taught the formal classes

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[3] In this article, "migrant children" is a shorthand referring to the children of migrant workers in China's major cities. These workers often come from regions with fewer work opportunities and lower wages in China. Due to the limit imposed by the household registration system (*hukou*), their children have little access to the public education resources in the cities where they work. Many informal schools have thus emerged to meet the demands for education of these migrant families. Volunteer teachers and managers are common in these schools. For more on migrant children in China and the schools serving them, please see Ling (2020).

according to the official curriculum, and in the afternoons and evenings when the professional teachers had gone home and the volunteers took over the school activities. Our ethnography shows that volunteers interacted with themselves and the students in ways that created a friendly and intimate atmosphere in the school. A volunteer group culture emerged mostly from a tacitly shared moral code of what volunteering should be like.

Whether it was in the relationships between volunteers and children, between volunteers amongst themselves, or between volunteers and the principal, the group culture was characterized by efforts to generate a sense of warmth and intimacy. In contrast to the paid teachers who taught the morning classes, the volunteers who ran most school activities from lunchtime to the evening tried to downplay hierarchies and discipline, to create a family like and playful atmosphere, to avoid professional work styles, to be creative and idiosyncratic in their teaching content and styles, and to avoid discussions on social or political problems that were beyond the group's ability to do anything about. The school, for the volunteers, was a setting to create a space of intimate solidarity and freedom, away from family, social, institutional and political pressures.

In a typical day, the atmosphere in the school would become livelier starting from lunch. Dispensing meals for lunch to the students was usually carried out by five to six volunteer teachers. They eagerly responded to student whining verbally as well as through gestures, trying to engage in a more intimate interaction with them. In contrast to the silence of the morning classes, at noon the entire school was replete with children's high-pitched voices and humming footsteps.

After most students left in the afternoon, a smaller group of around ten to twenty part-time volunteers would take over the classes. Most of them were students of nearby universities, and they would supervise the remaining students until they were picked up by their parents. Most of the time there was anything but silence or order in the classroom under the volunteers' supervision. The students constantly asked the volunteers to let them go to the bathroom, and usually they would come back with a Popsicle in hand. They also asked the volunteers about every exercise in their homework so that they would get many of the right answers with barely any effort. The volunteers seemed to be exhausted by these excessively active youngsters, yet at the same time they enjoyed interacting with them in this direct way. Most volunteers were willing to accompany these children with considerable patience. They illustrated the solutions to their assigned exercises step by step, chatted with them actively despite the lack of common topics, and occasionally shared some snacks and candies with them. Very few ever shouted at the students even if their endeavors to put the class in order were usually in vain. For them, what was more relevant to their volunteering experience was not accomplishing their task but rather the act of spending time with these children.

Most non-boarding students, teachers, and volunteers would leave the school before 5:30 pm. Around 6 pm, the boarding students and staff members would come to the kitchen with their lunchboxes and take dinner themselves. Vegetables grown in the schoolyard, such as cucumbers and cabbage, were ideal materials for an additional "organic dish" in such dinners. This added an idyllic hue to life in the school

for the volunteers. Some of them would fondly check the growth of the vegetables and have casual chats next to the small garden.

On most days the only social activity after dinner was casual chatting. A couple of volunteers and staff members would sit in the schoolyard and talk with each other about more solemn topics, such as current affairs, personal reflections of life, plans for the future, and so on. Busy as he was, Bu Hong sometimes joined these talks. On one occasion, he frequently mentioned, half-jokingly, that one of his pressing worries was that two volunteers living in the school were still single and not dating anyone.

If the weather was fine and no urgent work was at hand, a communal dinner would occasionally be held in the yard. Barbecue, dumplings and hotpot were common choices. Beer was a must for the attending men. Over these dinners, the staff members and volunteers told stories and their thoughts on the students and the school. They usually commented on the behavior and performance of the students and gossiped about their colleagues. Sometimes the conversation touched on the unfavorable social conditions affecting the students' growth, but there was hardly any deep conversation on this during the fieldwork. Generally, conversation steered away from social issues. Group members avoided drawing conversation away from the intimacy of their relationships with each other and with the children.

Bu Hong, the principal, rarely articulated explicit moral norms for the volunteers. In an interview with the first author, however, he expressed his observations on what he saw as the sense of emotional intimacy that defines the school's culture. When talking about the fact that many former volunteers kept paying short return visits to the school, he contrasted it with an incident, caught on a viral video, in which a van driver had run over a two-year-old toddler and driven off, with onlookers doing nothing to rescue the child or call the police. This incident had prompted an outpouring of soul-searching in the media and public discussions, about strangers' callous lack of empathy for each other in Chinese society (Yan 2009b). Reflecting on this incident and the volunteers' emotional attachment to the Hong School, Bu said,

> It's because people want to do this [volunteering for the school]. Everyone wants this school to survive…They want there to be more people to teach these children …When we find there are a few people who are indifferent, you will probably just have a critical attitude. But when you find that everyone is indifferent, you will feel cold. You will have no sense of security. When the society is indifferent, people want to be in a place with some warmth. This place is just such a place with warmth…I have tremendous pressure working in this school…but I feel warm. People who come here are all positive as well. You don't feel the indifference or cut-throat competition here, either.

The importance of civic intimacy to the Hong volunteers is reflected not only in the situations where intimacy does exist, but also where the moral code is broken. Volunteers often feel that the core value of their volunteering service is challenged when they feel that the moral code has not been respected. Volunteers expressed these feelings through their narratives of bad memories of volunteering. Chen Zhong, a young graduate and a volunteer in the Hong School, described her experiences of being excluded from some activities of the school. For her, not

being included amounts to a denial of her identity as a volunteer by her non-volunteer colleagues. She sees this exclusion as one of the most significant changes to her understanding of volunteering in her rich career as a volunteer since her first year in college. Yu Bing, another volunteer at Hong School, talked about misunderstandings she had with another volunteer in the school, which almost made her quit. Her comments on the incident reveal the importance of the moral code of intimacy for volunteers:

> I was so pissed off that time. I just wanted to find a place where there are less conflicts; why are there still so many? I feel that I don't have any conflict of interest with them. If it is for conflicts of interest that you stab me in the back [that's understandable]. Now I am a woman, a volunteer, with only so little stipend per month. I just don't see I would have any issues with them. But..

Evidently, she started volunteering with the assumption that volunteering should be a place of pure, interest-free and conflict-free relationships, and this was one of the reasons she volunteered. When this assumption proved wrong, she was gravely upset and almost gave up her volunteering.

These examples of interpersonal conflicts might be common in any type of social setting, and might make people upset in other settings too, such as at work. But they were more deeply upsetting in the volunteer setting, since, in that setting, people expect of each other to show qualities of trustworthiness, inclusion, and harmony characteristic of intimate relations. Breaking this intimacy amounts to breaking the moral code of volunteering.

Furthermore, Yu's positioning of herself in the conflict clearly reveals the connection between the pursuit of intimacy and the utopian nature of this type of voluntary fellowship. The three characteristics of her social identity in the Hong School Yu emphasized—a woman, a volunteer, and a person with a low stipend—are, generally, seen as signs of marginality. But as a volunteer, she had deliberately and voluntarily claimed and taken ownership of this marginal status—a status that she considered to be the starting point for another mode of social relations. But for her, her marginal status was not a place from which to fight the existing social order, but the basis for an alternative, intimate utopian sociality in which interpersonal conflicts based on struggle over resources and interests would be absent. In fact, she had worked in the private sector before joining Hong School as a volunteer teacher. She made the transition with a clear understanding that her income would be significantly lower, but that she would work in a peaceful and friendly environment. Thus, many volunteers are clear about the utopian nature of voluntary fellowships and see a clear boundary between those groups and more mainstream domains.

The volunteers of the Hong School constructed their group as an intimate refuge from the pressures of the formal education system. As students or recent graduates who were all too familiar with the strict discipline and competitiveness of Chinese schools, they consciously avoided replicating the formal educational culture by modelling the conventional student-teacher relationship. And yet, the school did not promote a specific, alternative pedagogical system: instead, they valued their own freedom to adopt their own idiosyncratic methods, and to relate to the children, and each other, more as fellows than as professionals.

This intimate space, as much as it was consciously sought and nurtured by the volunteers themselves, was also a product of the political reality: an unspoken and invisible line seemed to push the volunteers away from discussing the social problems and regulatory issues that excluded migrant children from the regular school system and created a need for special schools such as the Hong School, but maintained the Hong School in such a precarious position. This invisible political line prevented them from expanding their inquiries and potential lines of consciousness and action in directions beyond the immediate environment of their own volunteering work. Rather, then, they focused their thoughts, their emotions, and their energies onto the space that was open to them: the intimacy of their own fellowship.

And when the external social and political conditions made it impossible for the school to continue operating, they dispersed, heading elsewhere to seek for civic intimacy. Indeed, two changes in 2018 and 2020 led to the closing of the school. In 2018, the area where Hong School was located underwent reconstruction along with many other places in Beijing. The school was no longer able to rent a place of its own. It moved into a business building nearby, and some of the students moved back to their hometown for their education. In 2020, the COVID pandemic broke out, and even more migrant workers left Beijing with their children. As there were fewer and fewer students, the Hong School became inactive, and its principal, Bu Hong, along with some of the other senior staff and teachers, went to rural areas in China to continue their educational causes.

Group 2: the Dandelion youth group

Our second group, Dandelion, is a student-run NGO in Guangzhou. It was set up by two high school graduates in 2009, when they decided to spend their summer doing something meaningful, and they called up a group of friends to run a five-day summer camp for 66 migrant children in seventh grade. As stated by one of the founders, "What could a group of high school graduates do? [All we could do was] to teach some younger students. […] Actually there was nothing insightful or deep." (Peng 2017, p. 77). The camp was a success, and the volunteers were inspired to hold it again the following year. It gradually grew into a full-fledged organization, still functioning at the time of writing, which offers regular summer camps and tutorial programs for migrant children in collaboration with several schools in Guangzhou, with around 200 high school student volunteers recruited for specific projects. During the first author's fieldwork in 2014, it had about seven long-term core volunteers and three staff managing the association. One of the founders was pursuing her studies in the US, but this wasn't a problem for the operation. Although the organization leadership had formal titles and positions, the culture was informal and egalitarian, with most projects designed and operated through group discussions. Full-time staff had no fixed working hours, and there were no formalized administrative procedures. The organization preferred to see itself as a "warm big family" or a "group of good friends" (Peng 2017, pp. 119–120).

On its website, Dandelion's history and mission are summarized concisely as "since 2009, we have focused on serving migrant children of ages 10–15 in

Guangzhou". This service is not only instrumental; it stresses an idea of close connections between volunteers and the children they serve. Its core idea is reflected by the motto "help oneself as well as others and grow together". This togetherness among volunteers and between volunteers and the children they serve is widely talked about by the participants of Dandelion's activities. Volunteers are told to "put themselves in an equal position to that of the migrant students", and students are told to call the volunteers with an affectionate term for "elder brothers and sisters" (*gege jiejie*) rather than use the respectful title of teacher (Peng 2017, p. 81).

The value of such intimacy, whether in practice or in discourse, is widely shared among volunteers. Zheng, a volunteer for Dandelion, joined because she thought it was fun. She felt that she had not done many worthwhile things which could make her content at the end of her first year in university, so when she heard of Dandelion and found its volunteer programs interesting, she decided to join it. At the time of the interview in 2014, she had been volunteering for three months. She thought working at Dandelion was fun because she had a chance to meet and contact all kinds of people. Chatting with them was enjoyable for her. Moreover, playing and cooperating with volunteer colleagues also made her happy. Her words, though brief and general, reveal what constitutes the core of her idea of "fun" in volunteering: intimacy between people, no matter if they are other volunteers or people with other roles. This understanding of fun clearly echoes with Hong School volunteers' patience and geniality towards the children and each other.

The Dandelion volunteers also actively pursued equality in their relationships, minimizing their social backgrounds, rank or title in the volunteer organization, or other forms of social status. This equality is embodied through open, straightforward, and intimate conversations between volunteers and children. It is also seen as an expression of equality if every participant of the organization has a say in its management and decision-making process. Indeed, one of the Dandelion volunteers told us that what tied the operating team members and volunteers together, despite getting essentially no material rewards for their work, was largely the atmosphere of equality: no one would assume authority simply because they were more senior or had a higher title. As one volunteer, Huang, put it, "I think what Dandelion is doing is creating an opportunity for different groups, including university students, high school students, middle school students, and people of the same age from different districts to connect with each other. In this process, we can expand our vision, to see different aspects of the whole society. This also leads us to have a change in our worldview and view of life". For Huang, the most important aspect of this process was the experimental learning approach in which volunteers, teachers and students "are all relatively equal" and all participate in all phases of the learning activity. Another volunteer recalled a scene in which he talked freely with a boy who was among the children that he was teaching. He compared it to "chatting between two high-school students" and felt that they "put each other in equal positions." He said he liked pursuing an equal relationship between people, so this experience brought him a sense of accomplishment. For Mo, who coordinated human resources for the summer camp project, the reason why volunteers would join and stay in Dandelion is "because there is a group of fellows here" who find that "only in Dandelion could they feel they had

realized their true value, and been authentically moved". One volunteer, whose major was in non-profit management and had experience in many organizations, claimed that Dandelion was different from most public interest groups, because it didn't act like a charity just providing goods and services, nor did it maintain the status of teachers and students, preferring to relate to students as "elder brothers and sisters". Another volunteer, Zhuang, added: "it's not the same as those groups that take care of old people… it's not just teaching classes; it's full of love".

Dandelion volunteers write a lot about their own experiences. In their own representations, they frequently describe the intimacy they experienced in their volunteering. A compilation of such writings in 2013 is full of moving paragraphs like this:

> The warm cooking-gathering of the research team, Liao's suppressed giggles when listening to lewd songs in the subway, the plump brother with foolish expressions tutoring math for Manling that Jin the genius from Tsinghua couldn't solve, the finger-breaking four hours of online chatting with Shen, the ten letters we wrote to the students on the last day..

The author puts in tandem numerous touching moments shared with the volunteers or with the children expressed in concise yet picturesque phrases, constructing a textual montage of their ten-day shared life to highlight the maturing friendship which has developed in this period. The phrases are written in a style shot with nicknames, shorthand, and minutiae without context, such as to be enough to generate knowing smiles for insiders and a feeling of compelling camaraderie among the group for outsiders.

As in the Hong School, Dandelion volunteers articulated and attempted to enact a moral code characterized by intimacy and informality among all participants, and explicitly emphasized equality as a core value. Whether in the relationships between volunteer teachers and younger students, in the relationships between leaders and other volunteers, or in the decision-making processes and structures of the group, they consciously strove to minimize distinctions of social status, age or role, creating a "fun" space of friendship. One of the group's founders, Wang Xiang, wrote that it was difficult to describe the nature of the relationships within this space: "There seems to be a pressing need to find better vocabulary to articulate the relationship between volunteers in Dandelion and the students that we provide activities to. Overall, the relationship exhibits a strong sense of mutual appreciation and is not contained to common binaries such as 'student-teacher' or 'volunteer-beneficiary'" (Wang 2013, p. 3).

As an intimate utopia, Dandelion was the voluntary creation of its founders, who just wanted to do something meaningful. Within the limits of their capacities as high school and college students and within the limits of what was allowable as a mode of social action for youth, they had created a group that expressed the moral code of civic intimacy. Since the founding group were all classmates who were close mutual friends, the atmosphere of friendship and informality infused the group in its first few years, which, as it expanded, maintained the atmosphere of intimate fellowship even when the members were not friends outside the group.

But as the group experienced success and continued to grow, the moral code of intimacy was increasingly put under strain. Some members advocated applying for government funding schemes in order to expand the organization's programs and enhance their efficiency, while others preferred to deepen the "quality" of the activities by remaining true to the intimate spirit of Dandelion's early days. This increasingly posed a dilemma, as government funding opportunities for NGOs increased as part of a policy of outsourcing social services to community groups. But core members expressed their strong unwillingness to engage with the government—contrasting their own values of "sincerity" with the "formalism" (*xingshi zhuyi*) of government-sponsored projects, their grassroots and egalitarian approach with the bureaucratism of government agents, and their independence, which would be threatened if the group ended up relying on the government for most of its resources. Thus, they preferred to "keep a distance" from the government, accepting some resources but avoiding a too close collaboration with the state (Peng 2017, pp. 122–130).

Peng (2017) has described how Dandelion leaders strove to maintain what they called a "safe space" in relation to the government. On the one hand, they avoided crossing the government's "red lines" of politically sensitive and oppositional activities. On the other hand, they also avoided the government's "green line" of engaging deeply with government programs and resources. It was in the non-political "safe space", neither opposing nor integrating with the government, that Dandelion members felt that they could most fully express their values of civic intimacy, avoiding both repression and institutionalization.

Group 3: the Heart-to-Heart relief group

Our third group was set up right after the Wenchuan Earthquake of May 12, 2008 to help rescue the victims. One year later, when most of the emergency relief organizations had left, a small group of local volunteers decided to continue their help, and renamed their group as "Heart-to-Heart". This reborn group mainly worked toward raising financial and other support for students in need in the town of Mianzhu. They would visit the families of these students, donate some materials such as clothes and mosquito nets, and put prospective sponsors in contact with them. The group relied entirely on volunteers, and was not officially registered. The core group of volunteers consisted of seven mostly local entrepreneurs and professionals: the owner of a photo studio, the owner of a carpet store, a teacher, a civil servant. They collaborated with each other with trust and equality, and led a network of a few hundred more casual volunteers. In an interview, members highlighted the group's persistence and their enjoyment of its activities. Although at the time of our interview, the organization had a history of only 2 years, this was already something they were proud of, as one member put it: "Before there were a dozen teams [of volunteers for earthquake victims], how many are there now? How many keep running till now? To be frank we Heart-to-Heart are probably the last one." According to the members of this group, a key reason for their persistence was the special enjoyment the

members shared when working together, which, in the words of a member, "can't be bought", despite their highly different social and professional backgrounds.

Such intimacy is what kept them volunteering years after the earthquake when they all had their own families and jobs to care about. They were effusive in talking about the joy they experienced from their mutual emotional friendship and support, which even caused some to have conflicts with their spouses and family members. One of the volunteers in the group, talking in monologue without being prompted, said:

> Since I joined [the group] I've been getting along well with these bros. The main reason is that we share a common goal and a common wish, which is to do something for these children, to give them some help to the best of our ability. It is not easy for us to have come so far…No matter if we joined early or late, no matter if we understood the idea of public good or not, we are all very happy in doing what we do. I named one of the albums [of photos of the group's activities] in my QQ space [a Chinese social media platform] "I'm happy and I like it".

In fact, the earthquake had been a special circumstance conducive to the emergence of a powerful sense of intimacy among volunteers. One of the members described to us his feelings at the moment of the earthquake:

> May 12 was a watershed of my inner self; it changed my view of life… Although my parents had taught me to be kind since my childhood, before May 12 I didn't take it seriously…During the earthquake, I was almost hit in the back. I narrowly escaped death…I'm a photographer. I snatched the camera and went out to take photos. I felt the entire city was paralyzed; there was nothing but ambulances and cries. When I was taking photos, I would shed tears after pressing the shutter button. All I saw were people missing their arms or legs. Some women fell on their knees to beg me to help save her children. I couldn't take pictures anymore, so I put down the camera and volunteered for three days…I wanted to organize a group, but I didn't call it a "volunteer group." I just said I wanted to organize a group to save people…I asked a doctor for a name, and he said "volunteers." We established the group around 3:30 pm [the earthquake had taken place at 2:28]…[Three days later when soldiers, doctors, and other professional force of rescue had come to the affected areas] we, a few dozen [volunteers], dismissed our group to look for our own relatives in the tents, though most of us still helped with the rescue individually…In July, 2009, we got organized again, as many volunteers had gradually left the region by then. Many local volunteers stood up, as we were familiar with the place and knew what it needed. We gave the name "Heart-to-Heart" to our group.

At that time, in the face of an apocalyptic scene, he was no longer able to hold his professional identity as a photographer from falling apart. Maybe he felt that in such circumstances, taking pictures without doing anything else was futile, cold-blooded, or simply absurd. So he transformed himself into a helper in the purest

sense. Similar transformations happened to innumerable people of other backgrounds, as Wu said in the interview:

> What we have in common is that previously we were a businessman, a teacher, a doctor, or an official. Before I came [to the group] I didn't know that helping others triggers pleasure in the heart. Indeed.

These two sentences seem disjointed, but what he seemed to be implying is hardly equivocal. By the first sentence, he seemed to imply the vanishing of social identities based on division of labor. Many people, at the same moment when he put down his camera, put down their accounting books, their chalk, their stethoscopes or their briefcases, transformed themselves, and joined with the torrent of helpers who became identical to each other. Even the distinction between helpers and victims was not clear-cut; Wu's family spent days in the tent camp for victims. The entire population in the affected areas, together with the helpers from outside, became a mass barely differentiated in terms of their everyday mission and practice: at once helping and being helped. Even the doctors, soldiers and firemen were no more than better equipped and trained helpers, and they relied on local people for more efficient rescue. The disaster all of sudden reshaped the *gesellschaft*, where differentiated people were linked by abstract and utilitarian mutual dependence, into a *gemeinschaft*, where they became homogenized and linked by concrete acts and emotional expressions. Moreover, the latter included not only people from nearby but also from thousands of kilometers away. As another volunteer in Heart-to-Heart said:

> My home was in Hanwang, a seriously affected area of the earthquake. During the rescue, two divisions of troops came and stayed near my home…At the beginning of their stay here, they didn't have any water for a day and a night, and they ate only instant noodles crunched by their hands…When we heard of this we boiled some water for them at once. I was introduced to the head of the local station, and they got into the mountain that night…Moreover, some volunteers in nearby areas brought us some eggs when I was in Hanwang…Still some coming from Chengdu…brought us eggs, milk, biscuits, and small tents for the elderly. It was the atmosphere of immense love (*da'ai*) that touched us.

Again, this volunteer's story showed how people, not only those nearby, but those from afar, came to help the victims and also got help from them. Their words demonstrate that from volunteering, they gained a continuation of the feeling of "immense love," the sense of belonging to a *gemeinschaft* in which social hierarchies and identities have dissolved, and everyone has a simple and pure role: to help and to be helped. Even two years after the intense liminality of the immediate post-quake chaos and social undifferentiation had subsided, the Heart-to-Heart volunteers were inspired and propelled by the overwhelming emotion of "immense love" that they had experienced. While social life had returned to its routines, the Heart-to-Heart volunteers kept that sense of love alive amongst themselves. That sense of intimacy seemed even more important for them than

the specific acts of providing material aid to children in need. The challenges they faced, in terms of the misunderstanding from their own family members, and the lack of support from state authorities, further strengthened their mutual bonding as group defined by a love that seemed to be absent in the ordinary world. In talking about their volunteering, they stressed how it was different from their lives as entrepreneurs or as civil servants. As one leading member put it,

> It is a pleasure for the heart. This pleasure, we can put it like this: money can't buy it. This pleasure, we can put it like this: I personally consider, even though I [now] eat a bit simpler [food], I live in a bit worse conditions, and I don't go anywhere for leisure, I don't even play mah johng, I put it all into my caring. To help people, my heart feels good, it will give me long life.

The issue of disaster relief after the Wenchuan earthquake is fraught with political tensions and controversies, notably around the collapse of poorly built schools (Xu 2017). The Heart-to-Heart group's actions were severely hampered by its lack of legal status. They described themselves as "doing this open and aboveboard endeavor in a shifty-eyed way." Even though they didn't hide their activities, which were well known, "we are like an underground organization", "we are illegal grassroots streakers." In one instance, one of their visits to a village had been stopped by the local authorities since they had not notified the village committee in advance. No government agency was willing to register them. It was difficult to approach them, since they were doing things that the local authorities were supposedly responsible for; and it was inconvenient to claim knowledge about their failings. And if the group was too successful in its actions, it would lead to difficulties, as it would embarrass some government officials.

And yet, while the Heart-to-Heart members were clear in explaining the problems they faced in dealing with the authorities, they stressed their lack of interest in further pursuing the matter. They could have registered as a business, but the implications of formalization violated their moral code: "We wouldn't be able to use the Heart-to-Heart Team name… [it might need to be called] the Loving Persons Communication Company, that would be the end of it!" There would also be more legal responsibility, accountability, and expectations to expand the scale of their activities. Thus, while they expressed their dissatisfaction at their precarious status, the possible solution would have led to a new set of structures and challenges which, they seemed to fear, would undermine the intimate, informal and small-scale nature of their group. Thus, they continued to operate in the grey legal zone. As one Heart-to-Heart volunteer stressed, "Actually we are not interested in politics; we are interested in conscience (*liangxin*). After the baptism of May 12, we found what we should do." Ultimately, the group was not interested in engaging in critical discourses on government policies and actions. As one of its members said, "the government builds the buildings and we seal the interstices." Like Hong School volunteers, they were eloquent and passionate in expressing the joy and emotions they experienced by building closer connections between people. This is what mattered to them, and it gave them the strength to persist in the face of political obstacles.

The apolitical orientation of Heart-to-Heart was undoubtedly shaped by the constraints imposed by the state on NGOs, which limited the scope of the group's

activities. One could say that they focused on their intimacy and fellowship because they were not given the option of organizing a larger, more professional and impersonal NGO, or to focus their energies on activism about the poor construction standards of collapsed schools. Such assumptions would be entirely speculative, because there is no way of knowing what they would have done in a more liberal political environment. But there is no doubt that China's political environment created a context in which, to the extent that they decided to do something for quake victims, the only viable approach was one based on nurturing and cherishing intimate ties in the absence of external support. But there is more to it than this. The Heart-to-Heart volunteers spoke with such enthusiasm and passion about the "great love" they experienced—so much so that for some of them, their devotion caused severe stress on their marriages and businesses, and even declining income– that we can only conclude that the intimate utopia they had created had intrinsic value for them. While they did express frustration at the lack of state support, their attitude was not one of resigning themselves to do things differently from what they would have done if they had had more freedom to organize and to act. Thus, they were apolitical in the sense that they accepted the government's attitudes toward civil society groups as they are. They did not hope to challenge the state; they were willing to cooperate with it if the possibility existed; but they did not place much energy in seeking such possibilities. The relationship with the state was not their primary concern. As frequently mentioned in the group's blog, they followed the key principle of "don't trouble the common people when doing things, and don't bring disturbance to the government".

The group's founder quit in 2011, saying he had run out of energy. Within a year, Heart-to-Heart seemed to have finally obtained recognition and support from the government, as evidenced by blog posts of events attended by officials of the Mianzhu Civil Affairs Bureau as well as other government departments, and other posts in which the group was recruiting volunteers for government-initiated public service events. The group continued operating, in a manner that appeared to be increasingly incorporated into state-sponsored volunteer programs, for a few years after that, until around 2014.

Group 4: Righteous Academy

Righteous Academy is a reading group of Chinese classics that had nationwide impact in China, especially from 2001 to 2010. Its founder, Wang Pei, had a master's degree in philosophy from Beijing University and is eloquent in explaining the vision and mission of the Academy in philosophical terms. It had three main branches of activities, among many others: reading Chinese classics aloud in parks early in the morning, teaching Chinese classics in primary and middle schools, and supporting traditional-style Confucian academies in rural areas. From early on the Academy drew attention from security departments of the Chinese government. Wang Pei revealed in 2016 that since 2002 his organization had been under surveillance by the state security agencies. Yet he befriended officials from those agencies and gained their trust. From 2000 to 2012, more than a thousand volunteers

participated in running the activities. Most of them were students in elite universities. There was a general atmosphere of equality between Wang, full-time employees of the Academy, and volunteers. Wang is meticulous in keeping most of his activities and those of the volunteers public online. The Academy has a well-maintained website, which is functioning perfectly even years after the group itself ran out of steam. The website provides a chronology of milestones and major events from 2001 to 2009. At the top of the website, however, are a list of "ten aspects of volunteering", which Wang Pei has promoted through his other writings and practices. Many of these principles stress intimacy among people, such as "a pure affection"; "a natural and pleasant sense of togetherness"; "always do things in a simple, direct and immediate manner"; and "obligation and sharing". We have followed Wang Pei and the Academy for over a dozen years since 2008.

In his talks and interviews, Wang often spoke about the ways his group aimed to influence the evolution of Chinese culture. Yet he stressed the importance of small groups rather than large organizations in working for this evolution. For him, small groups are less driven by funding and more by the pure motives of the heart. More importantly, these small groups, when gathered together, are not for expressing anything in particular. Rather, they aim to create an atmosphere of warmth and gradual progress.

According to both our interviews and observations and the Academy's writings, the volunteers enjoyed the close connection between people felt during reading aloud the Chinese classics and other volunteer work for the Academy. Recitation as a way to evoke connections between people, especially between strangers, is highlighted as a value of the activity. This value is echoed in our interviews with other groups of volunteers. In one interview with a group of seniors, one of them said:

> Once I start to recite, immediately people will come and recite in echo. I take the sheet and read aloud; right away people stop to watch. I am happy about that. Because us old folks are basically trash [laughs]. So it's great when people respond.

Again, the volunteers experienced and valued the connection with strangers engendered by their volunteering. Such connections may be fleeting, but it's enough to strike a chord in the hearts of volunteers who aspire to break the coldness between strangers and build up closer relationships with them. They spoke warmly about an old 80-year-old professor living in the neighborhood who, on seeing them reciting the classics in the park during his daily walk, spontaneously started expounding on the meanings, and then came every day in the summer heat, preparing handouts on the texts.

Volunteers for the morning recitations in one Beijing park, most of whom were retirees, stressed their lack of formal education or qualifications: many were from peasant or working class backgrounds, whose parents, in the early days of the Peoples' Republic, had taught them some sayings from traditional childrens' morality books such as the *Three Character Classic* (*sanzijing*) or the *Standards of the Good Pupil* (*dizigui*). Their identity as "volunteers" gave them a space in which they could pursue and share their interest without formal hierarchies or distinctions. As one volunteer said,

> When we promote [the recitation activities], we tell people that we are volunteers, we aren't one of those scholars, and we aren't one of those government departments. I'm just a retired worker, I'm just an ordinary person like everyone else. We do this simply because we think this traditional culture should be handed down.

Guo Xiquan, a volunteer for the Academy and a retired teacher in Beijing who led morning recitations in a park, wrote in a similar vein, in the group's website: "[It is] pure without any [intent to] fish for fame. We gather together simply for doing things…"

Junli, who was listed on the Academy website as an excellent volunteer, wrote the following reflection on her experience of leading morning recitations in the Xiangshan park:

> For me, the three or four months of morning recitations in Xiangshan from the spring to the summer last year was a "golden time." Each time everyone was very happy, talking and laughing, like a family. … Actually, those memories seem to be unconnected to morning recitations. I can't say clearly which aspect is more important, the recitation itself, or the opportunity to be with everyone, or both?

While the Righteous Academy could be defined as a "Confucian" group owing to its focus on promoting the recitation of the Confucian classics, there was, in fact, little emphasis on explicit Confucian doctrines, rituals, ideology, or formalized traditional culture. In fact, said Wang Pei, "I am annoyed by those who promote traditional culture: they just promote tradition for the sake of tradition… but they don't consider the preparations needed to create a social space for the rebuilding of social relationships". He compared those promoters to "missionaries" who "give out dead things", editing, publishing and giving out books on Confucius. "But what about the social space within which these books are read?"

The focus of the Academy's activity and discourse was primarily to use embodied practices of recitation to nurture authentic human relations, and an explicit advocacy of the free and egalitarian relations of volunteering as the ideal expression of these values. When the Academy recruited volunteers to teach the classics in Beijing schools, Wang emphasized the volunteers' lack of qualifications. Unlike other programs that, in order to attract people, design course materials and methodologies, "the Righteous Academy doesn't do that, and hence comes its influence. The materials, and even the content, are secondary. Most important is the vitality (*shengmingli*) that is nurtured." This vitality, he said, arises from the relaxed relationship between the volunteer teachers and the pupils, in which the teacher is more like an "older friend" (*da pengyou*) who "chats" with the students, rather than a teacher with a "strict" relationship with them.

> The teacher, basing himself on the spirit of righteousness (*daoyi*), is equal with the pupils. Our volunteers themselves don't have strong traditional culture. So they learn together with the pupils. The pupils are their teachers, because children are pure and clean. Because the relationship between

the volunteer teacher and the child is free of external interference and frameworks, the vitality can appear. Through this activity, the spirit of righteousness appears… It [volunteer-teaching] is first of all [an] inter-*personal* [relationship], but not, say, between a teacher and a student, a Ph.D. and a pupil, or a representative of high-end traditional culture and that of [cultural] emptiness. We do not have any concrete teaching tasks and thus are free from its constraints…As a result we have no psychological burden at all; we are very relaxed. In this way, we spend time with the children in freedom and ease without any entanglements or bondage. Indeed, we are using some resources of the traditional culture, but [in] such working relationships, [in] such states of communication between souls…our present work is simply a kind of rousing, promoting, and prodding. [We] need a rebuilding of interpersonal relationships.

Wang, clearly, was trying to link volunteerism with the possibility of building up a utopian type of interpersonal relationship in which equality replaces hierarchies and intimacy replaces boundaries.

Academy volunteers contrasted this intimacy with the characteristics of institutionalized organizations. One of them, a postgraduate student at the China University of Politics and Law, reflected that institutionalization could lead to the loss of a sense of greatness, of a certain flexibility, "the loss of something essential." And he compared the Academy, which strove to come close to that ideal, with large Foundations such as the Ford Foundation or Oxfam: while those groups have a strong power of influence, ultimately, the influence is a spiritual one that flows between concrete persons, rather than from an abstract institution. "If that thing is lost, the whole soul will be lost, and the whole organization becomes meaningless."

Another volunteer, Longwei, a doctoral student at Beijing Normal University, spoke about how the Academy took inspiration from Wang Fengyi, a popular Confucian educator in the early 20th century who, he claimed, did good deeds without creating an organization, without promoting himself nor acquiring fame. The anti-institutionalizing attitude, which was so strong in the Academy, led Wang to turn down many significant donations and opportunities to collaborate with state organs. He once told the second author, "Some people talk about how the Academy is growing, but I don't think it's growing. I feel that I am always on the line between life and death".

Indeed, the Academy ran out of steam in the early 2010s. Its activities petered off, and Wang spoke of his personal financial difficulties in raising his child, with almost no income. But perhaps the fluid structure and small budget ultimately made the group more resilient. Wang did not stop his practice of promoting Chinese classics and intimate relationships, albeit at a smaller scale. In 2021, he revived the Academy in the hills to the north of Beijing, this time in the form of a farm, where volunteers study the classics while gardening. The Academy remains small-scale, unstructured, and encourages closeness between participants.

The volunteer as a social category and the values of civic intimacy

Western readers may find the moral codes of intimacy described in our four cases to be unexceptional. But there is something utopian about these values in the Chinese context. The intimate utopias described here strongly contrast with the heavy weight of obligations and normative expectations that characterize Chinese family life, even if family life is also a space of intense intimacy. They also strongly contrast with the highly competitive, instrumental, and hierarchical nature of Chinese work and political relations. As we have written elsewhere (Ning & Palmer 2020), these volunteers strongly reject both the individualistic if not selfish mindset of the market economy, and the ideal of sacrificial, heroic selflessness of volunteers promoted in state propaganda. Perhaps the intimacy we describe can be compared to that between friends—and yet, the volunteers build an intimacy around actions of helping others, rather than around the mutual entertainment and/or mutual help, with expectations of reciprocity, that characterize friendship in Chinese culture. This is what makes it a "civic" intimacy. The moral code of the volunteers in our cases explicitly rejects the instrumental relations of work, the performative relations of politics, the obligations of family, and the reciprocity and peer pressure of friends, as the foil against which pure relations of solidarity are idealized and enacted in their volunteer settings. The volunteers know that the intimacy they seek to build and maintain with each other sometimes conflicts with the obligations associated with mainstream domains of social relationships (recall Bu Hong's worry about his volunteers' marriage), and they know the intimacy of volunteering cannot replace those mainstream relationships. Nevertheless, they invest themselves to build and maintain groups within which they can nurture intimacy, giving them a temporary space for forging their idealized relationships. It is in this sense that the groups are "utopias."

In our semi-structured interviews with all participants in the study (including those from groups not selected as cases for this article), a set of questions aimed to prompt volunteers to compare volunteering with other forms of unpaid labor or service. Regardless of their group or background, most participants consistently stressed the free, non-obligatory and non-calculative nature of their volunteering compared to other forms of unpaid labour such as helping family members (seen as an obligation), reciprocating favors (seen as calculative and an obligation), serving the Communist Party or Youth League (seen as instrumental for one's career) or serving a religious community (often seen as either instrumental for the religious organization, or as a tied with religious teachings rather than purely disinterested). They also contrasted the "pure simplicity" (*danchun*) nature of their volunteering with the complicated, instrumental relationships between colleagues at work where people have competing interests. As one focus group interviewee in Chengdu told the second author, "In volunteer groups, there are no obvious or major interest-based conflicts. Everyone just does their best to do their task. But other types of organizations all have at least some degree of clashes of interests. I feel that in the relations between volunteers, I am very happy, the atmosphere is one that melds people together… everyone is happily doing what

they want to do, there are no demands on others." Asked about what would make someone fail to meet the standard of a volunteer, responses often revolved around a lack of genuine motivation. These responses allow us to construct a basic set of values surrounding the concept of the "volunteer" (*zhiyuanzhe*) in contemporary China: true and authentic volunteering, for our respondents, is characterized by freedom and spontaneity, purity of motives, equality and informality, and is consciously and organizationally distinct from the worlds of work, family, or politics.

These responses reflect how volunteers understand the concept of volunteering in an abstract sense. When asked to speak about their own personal experiences of volunteering, we found differences depending on the groups and programs that volunteers had served in. For those who served in official programs sponsored by the government or the Communist Party Youth League, positive descriptions of their experiences revolved around the satisfaction of helping others, the sense of being appreciated by society, personal growth, and advancing a positive cause. Negative comments primarily focused on organizational issues, on living and working conditions, and on how their volunteer work didn't meet their expectations in terms of their capacity to make an impact. These discourses focused either on individual goals and expectations, on assessments of social impact, or on logistical and organizational issues. They reflect primarily instrumental concerns, whether for personal growth, for organizational efficiency, or for social impact. These participants had little to say about the relationships between volunteers. They did not reflect the moral code of civic intimacy.

But for another type of volunteer—notably those in grassroots and more informal groups, and who demonstrated a high level of commitment—another theme emerged very strongly, which was the quality of relationships between volunteers, and between volunteers and the people they served. For these volunteers, much of their accounts of positive and negative aspects of their experience revolved around the quality of relationships. It is around the comments of these volunteers that we have elaborated the moral code of civic intimacy.

We can identify the emergence of these values in the comments by two Chinese volunteers from a foreign bank in Beijing. The first author met and talked to them while they were volunteering at Hong School with around ten colleagues in 2013. They donated dictionaries and other books and stationery for studying. They also taught English courses. Their volunteer work was part of their company's corporate social responsibility programs. Apart from the Hong School, they had rich volunteer work experiences in other schools and orphanages in Beijing. As such, the highly formalized nature of their volunteering and the relatively low level of commitment make them more similar to the state-organized volunteers. But their values are close to those in the second group, who aspire for civic intimacy.

In their conversation with the first author, the two volunteers talked much about how volunteerism was about interpersonal relationships. When asked about the difference between work and volunteering, one of them, Hu, answered that volunteering "makes you feel you are more like a person in a society." The way she used the term 'society' in this context is akin to Tönnes' *gemeinschaft*, because by this word she is stressing the fellowship interconnection between people. For her, life in a corporation is a more competitive, impersonal

experience. "But …when you are helping others…it's not like you are stronger than others…it's just you are exerting your own [ability], and the other [i.e., the recipient] can give you a good response. You have an interaction." After the interview, she went on to distribute Chinese dictionaries to the students in a classroom in Hong School. She jovially interacted with each of them, and taught them how to use a dictionary.

Gao, a younger colleague of Hu and another active participant of the volunteer programs of this company, taught English courses at Hong School which involved dancing moves. In the interview, she described to the first author her previous experience with children in an orphanage. She said, "The first time I just toured around, and my feeling was just at this level [making a gesture implying not high]. After you go there more often, the children there would run to you saying 'ah, sister Jiawen has come again!' This is a different feeling. The first time you go there, the children won't say this. It's just another group of strangers. The second time would be strangers with some familiarity. Then after more visits, the children will interact with you. This is a different feeling. Now I go and they would ask me, 'sister Gao, did you eat the dumplings we made last time?'" This process of establishing familiarity and friendship between strangers reflects an intimacy experienced in volunteering, that comes with efforts and devotion.

The above examples speak to the relationship between volunteers and the people they serve. Another dimension concerns the emergence of friendships amongst volunteers. Just like the case of Dandelion discussed above, many volunteers from other groups shared similar experiences to us. As one student volunteer in Chengdu said, "We should communicate like friends: everybody is equal, there is no special status, there is no difference between you and me."

One may consider that those comments merely express the momentary happiness of good relations and friendship during volunteer experiences—perhaps a form of leisure, but hardly a moral code. But in the four groups we identified as aspiring to "intimate utopia", the sense of fellowship is more than a fleeting feeling—it is passionately felt by volunteers, even to the extent of defining the identity of the volunteer group. For these groups, we can speak of a moral code that draws the boundary between the space of civic intimacy that defines the group, and the outside world which is seen as exemplifying the absence or even the opposite of those values.

We can treat this as a binary code, in Alexander's sense (2006a, pp. 55–58), that sees emotional closeness, care, equality, freedom, and purity of motive as the "sacred" core of civility; and which defines itself against the "profane" world of emotional distance, competition, formal hierarchies, and instrumental rationality. The space that these groups try to create is one of warm mutual friendship and support, in which everyone works together, with freedom and equality. These terms, however, are not understood as abstract political principles—they are not interested in "fighting for freedom" or "struggling for equality"; rather, they seek for groups that they could freely join and leave as they wish, in which they had no attachments of obligation other than the attachment that arises from pure and genuine relations, and within which formal hierarchies were minimized.

Emic theories of civic intimacy

Most of the volunteers in the groups we have described hint at the importance of intimacy in volunteering in terms of their personal feelings about very concrete situations. Some volunteers who take leading roles, on the other hand, often explicitly theorize intimacy into their ideal of volunteering. In this section, we engage with two emic or insider theories of civic intimacy, as they were elaborated by Mu of the Hong School and Wang of the Righteousness Academy.

Mu: creating an "environment" of "positive energy"

One such leader is Mu Che, a volunteer teacher at the Hong School. He was also a founder of a volunteer-based soccer club in Beijing. He shared with the first author many ideas underpinning his volunteer cause. In fact, he embedded it in the general context of a lack of intimacy between people in contemporary China. At the very beginning of our interview, he laid out the central aim of his soccer club:

> Soccer would serve as a platform. Apart from activities, it's mainly about building up a kind of social responsibility. This keeps everyone's mentality relatively equal and just, and no one would feel that kind of indifference, coldness, inhumanness and so on. In other words, it's about finding the feeling of the past, the intimacy between people in the past.

Here he used "the past" to refer to the era of his childhood, roughly the late 1970s and the early 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution. For him, it was an era when "communications and bonding between people took place in a natural and caring environment." He contrasted this image of the past with contemporary Chinese society, which for him is "materially abundant, developing fast economically, but where people [only have so much energy to] care more about those issues most immediately relevant to their life." His club comes to fill this gap, so that people might develop a kind of intimacy and mutual help among themselves and toward others, especially those in need.

This motive for the founding of the soccer club is translated into the everyday functioning of the group, though with some minor setbacks. The rules of participation required emotional investment into what he called the "environment" (*huanjing*), by which he meant the social space opened up by the club's activities. In his words:

> If you have built up a passion and recognize the environment, then when you have time, you will think up the environment. It is also to build up a habit of thinking..but it's not a rule..Many of our members and their families call it the purest environment. When members come, they wouldn't have any burden in their mind. The relationships between us are sometimes caring like those between siblings.

He followed this depiction with ample examples, such as members urging him to eat regularly and keeping him from smoking and drinking too much soda. In the Chinese cultural context, showing concern for people by scolding them about bad habits is understood and often welcomed as a show of the intimacy characteristic of relations between close family or friends. In his teaching at the Hong School, he consciously tried to generate emotional intimacy, notably through a rite in which he did a high-five with each student. At the end of his classes, he ordered the students to stand in line. Then the line marched toward him and the child passing by did a high-five with him. In this rite he was playful as well; he sometimes suddenly raised his hand up high, and the unlucky child had to jump with effort to reach the palm. After clapping with everyone, he would declare the end of the class.

When talking about his teaching methods, he highlighted this high-five rite. Instead of a tradition or a habit of his, this practice had been particularly conceived for the classes in this school; he rarely had any clapping rite in his soccer club. He explained why he had the students clapping with him:

> We all know that in a match we clap with our teammates to cheer up. Its connotation has much *zheng nengliang* (positive energy). Therefore I think this is a good way to approach the children, educate them, and foster desirable manners among them. On the first day I taught in this school, I told them that this was friendship, trust, and teamwork. It has been three years since then. No matter how different the students' characters are, I think, it is not difficult for them to develop this habit. Anyway, every time I do high-five with them, I am very happy, and the children are very happy, too. Through clapping with them, I have fostered their trust in me, which facilitates my teaching of other things. For example, I have told them to cut their fingernails regularly and I check it in every class. They had a certain level of resistance at the beginning, but finally formed this habit.

Mu's remarks suggest that the moral code of intimacy was the primary purpose of his setting up his soccer club, with soccer simply being the vehicle through which intimacy could be generated. They also suggest that the intimacy could both attract and retain participants. Moreover, Mu promotes this value in groups with different aims, including his soccer club and the Hong School. In both of these organizations, the value of intimate relationships is widely shared and practised. Hence the significance of the moral code of intimacy in China: it links groups with different aims together and gives their participants a common moral language.

Indeed, Mu's theory of groups of intimacy has a public dimension, by which such groups can have a broader influence on society than those who actually participate in them. For him, his organization and volunteer service function in two ways. First, it is a concentration of energy. In his words,

> This association gathers those who I think are good people. We want to organize ourselves together to gather our meager power to make a greater one, so that we can do something for this society and others. It's just this simple, and I am just playing the role of a gatherer.

He firmly believes that there are impulses, scattered among individuals, that are driving people to do something good for society. Yet the force gathered from them is neither pro- or anti-government. It is just working on the social and cultural level, in a way that "works around" the government, in his words.

Second, his associations work through mutual support between people. He admits that there are many problems in contemporary Chinese society, but he holds hope that there is a possibility to improve it. He doubts the value of purely verbal criticism of these problems. His practices of improving society start with himself being good to others:

> We still have the possibility to improve our living environment. It's just a matter of how to think and act..This society must be one where people help people. You first help others, then there will be some return…[in the sense that] when the environment around you is improved, your own life will be improved as well. If we always complain, it won't be improved. Have you tried to improve it, to do it? Do it firstly with yourself when you want to change your life and environment. How [else] can you create an environment where people will smile and greet you when you pass by?

In sum, Mu's theory of intimacy is based on an observation about the general decline of emotional closeness among people in contemporary Chinese society. He believes that his association can address this problem by building up intimacy between its members and then passing it on to those outside it.

Mu's approach, and his use of the term "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) in his explanation of his "high five" ritual at the Hong School, raise questions because the term has been widely used in Chinese state propaganda under the rule of Xi Jinping (Hird 2018). Is Mu then merely repeating propaganda? Or does he use the term merely as a legitimizing cover for a more subversive activity? Both of these hypotheses are natural consequences of the generalized hermeneutics of suspicion that is produced by a propaganda regime: when a person uses the same terms as propaganda, they are suspected of being either a naïve and unreflective broadcaster of the propaganda or of falling into the state's discursive trap by orienting their actions in the direction suggested by the discourse. The term "positive energy" went viral in the Chinese public sphere in July 2012, immediately after the publication of the Chinese translation of the positive psychology self-help guide *Rip it Up* by Richard Wiseman, the Chinese title of which is *Zheng Nengliang* or "positive energy". Later, Xi Jinping used the term in some speeches shortly after becoming the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in November 2012, and the term became widespread within Chinese official discourses and propaganda. The use of positive psychology by Chinese official discourses is an exemplary case of the appropriation of values of psychological self-improvement (Yang 2013; Palmer & Winiger 2019). And yet, the discursive overlap between Mu's and Xi's uses of "positive energy" should not lead us to conclude that Mu is merely a dupe of state propaganda that blinds him to social reality. Indeed, as we have written elsewhere (Ning & Palmer 2020), long-term volunteers are at pains to reject the ways in which volunteerism is positively characterized in official discourse. They are conscious of state discourses and deliberately distance themselves from it.

Mu, himself a former activist of the failed 1989 Tiananmen student movement, had developed his theory of civic intimacy after profound reflections on how to act for the improvement of society within China's authoritarian political system. Mu's use of "positive energy" thus has ambiguous connotations in relation to the use of the same term in official discourses, and this ambiguity reveals something about the meaning of intimate utopias in relation to the state: the intimate utopia is based on an acceptance and internalization of the restrictions on political action and discourse in China. But at the same time, the intimate utopia is based on the dream of relating to people in ways that are not possible or legitimate within the conventional and politically circumscribed domains of social life, and on resisting the formal channels of civic engagement that are promoted by the state.

Wang: an intimate circle without a center

In an interview with the second author, Wang Pei, founder of the Righteous Academy, harkened back to the relations between Confucius and his disciples as the inspiration for his intimate utopia:

> I think that [the relationship among the participants of the Academy] is like that between Confucius and his students: it's not the relationship between a teacher and a student in the strict sense. The students came and went according to their own will, and he was not making a religion nor a party nor a business. He recognized himself as [promoting] the "right way" (*dao*), but he didn't have any official documents…He also had different opinions with his students. So all of them were unified by the idea of "learning."

Wang's democratic, egalitarian, and free and unstructured conception of the original Confucian circle is quite different from conventional associations of Confucianism with hierarchy, conservatism, and autocracy. For Wang, this was connected to his analysis of the spiritual condition of Chinese people in the contemporary period, in which, owing to the tumultuous transformations of China's modern history, "there are no teachers and no students, and everyone still has a feeling of being alone and helpless." In this context, working with children plays a deep spiritual function—the goal is not so much to teach the classics to children, as to use the intimacy of interactions with children to awaken the possibility of pure relationships between all people. "Children are gods", said Wang.

> "Those of us with Ph.Ds and masters are like leaves about to wither, and meeting children is like meeting water and sunshine, you know? At the beginning it was like, I have to teach him something, but then, it flips, it's like this kind of inner human touch is awakened in [the volunteer], or his spiritual side, it's a great help and healing to him. Because college students have not yet entered society, and they have not yet established themselves, so they are psychologically in a sub-healthy state. To a certain extent, they are between ideals and reality. They are very anxious. Well, in this kind of practice of public service, it is the children who [are doing it for] us."

Wang thus aimed to create settings in which, through exposure to children, to the classics and to the world of the ancient sages, people today could make emotional connections with each other, leading to a different type of relationship from those that take place in institutions. These considerations, for Wang Pei, were not in isolation from his analysis of the broader evolution of civil society in China. On the one hand, he saw himself and his Academy as a path-breaker at a time, in the early 2000s, when there were very few grassroots organizations in China.

> We got up early and walked in the night, when dawn hadn't broken. When most people hadn't noticed, this field [of grassroots action] was still pure, … so at this time we were headstrong, we did things according to our own understanding, so we did things with a real flavour. Nobody stopped us, and there was no pressure caused by drawing too much attention.

At a seminar on civil society in 2016, Wang showed a photograph of a gathering of morning recitation in a park, and mused on its significance. He emphasized the almost spontaneous nature of the gathering, in which volunteers, without any advance publicity, put up a flag and distributed some flyers to random tourists and residents.

> Take a person and give him a simple idea: go onto the street, you need to bring people together. It's not to bring them to a specific spot, or to do anything specific, but it's to bring people together into an intimate small group, and then, they will disperse after it's over. … [It's not like] a social work department. I don't know, you have so many theories, maybe for a common goal, for a social movement, sometimes this might be alright. But [what we do] is spontaneous. In front of you are random strangers. And then you first need to stand up, not like some street preacher—well, maybe a little bit—but you are serving everyone, bringing them together, and then bringing these dispersed individuals, for a period of time, half an hour, everyone around something. But look, look at this picture: there is no center. They are surrounding a tree. That is to say, everybody can come together, but for what? Actually, it seems we are a true image of Chinese society. Everybody needs something to gather around, but there is no such thing. But it is possible to gather people in some form. But using what? And, truly, after you do it, you will have a very different feeling in your heart. It seems you need to raise something very specific, but actually it shouldn't be too specific.
> You want to attract people, but your center is empty. At the most, you have hung up a small Academy flag, sometimes not even that. People have become a group, but they don't know what its core is. But around it, there are a lot of people…. Two minutes earlier, this was an empty space, a lot of people coming and going. Then, suddenly, within two minutes, maybe one hundred people have gathered. … People were dispersed, without any order, and they came together. But there's nothing for them to express or to vent out. It's something gentle and gradual, something comfortable. And everyone is together, reading the texts or something. This is different from reading the *Analects* for the sake of reading the *Analects*. The psychological atmosphere that is created is

completely different. … These small gatherings, how to make them spontaneously appear and disappear, to make them aggregate at any moment, because this gathering can acquire a new meaning. But you should not turn it into fixed forms and processes, to turn it into a substantive organization.

Wang's description evokes something profound about simple gatherings of people reciting texts in parks. The focus is actually not on the texts, but on the act of triggering spontaneous, intimate gatherings of strangers, however ephemeral they may be. There is something mystical about it—it creates "a very different feeling in your heart". The gathering generates what one could call a Durkheimian collective emotion, but one that lacks a sacred center to anchor it and give it permanence.

The ephemeral nature of this civic intimacy is linked by Wang to both the state of development of grassroots action in China, still in its infancy, and also to the political and institutional environment, which orients groups into forms of organization that lead them to lose their soul, and to potentially enter into political tension with the government. Speaking in 2016, he claimed that the public interest (*gongyi*) in China is still in an embryonic stage; it has not yet been born and its form has not yet crystallized; nor has Chinese society yet found its stable form. Thus, it is not the time for organization and institutionalization, nor is it the time to "seek resources from society, to make demands on society."

In the midst of what Wang called this "first phase" of "folk grassroots" in China, the government and other actors tried to replicate, to institutionalize, to support, and to regulate the growing world of volunteer groups. Wang, echoing the concerns of the Dandelion group, stresses how this wave of institutionalization threatens civic intimacy. In one of the earliest interviews with him in 2008, after the second author introduced his research plan, Wang replied by criticizing such research projects, especially those aimed at understanding his and other grass-root initiatives in terms of project management involving grant application and management, accountability, and outcome-based evaluation (Spires 2012; Lai & Spires 2020) :

In these years I have met lots of people and organizations for research. Last year I told [a famous scholar in the study of NGOs in China], "your research seems to care about the development of NGOs and civil society in China, but your concern, for me, seems to have negative side-effects." Because [Righteous Academy] is explicitly spiritual. It is not for something concrete…We are self-conscious that we are for a spiritual cause. So I told [another famous scholar], "look at all the research about philanthropy and welfare, such as those about project management. Everyone is promoting this system and accountability, using institutions [to build up China's civil society]. Yet while the Ford Foundation has funded so many public welfare projects, how many grass-root teams has it really fostered?...I am afraid there's none."

He described a conflict he had had with the Ford Foundation, which had hoped to support his group in 2002:

I think this pure project management approach [used by the Ford Foundation] is inappropriate for truly grassroots [organizations]. In the end, we

recruit 100 people, it might well be that only 10 or 20 fit the project. Yet I can't just drop those 80 people. In all these years, 40% to 50% of my experiences are people who, through the Academy, do things that can't be seen; it's all about keeping company with everyone. They [have issues with] further education, graduate school entrance exams, and deal with issues of family and love. They would just call me.

For him, it is these intimate connections between members of the Academy that are essential, rather than the instrumental rationality of project management. Wang recalled debates with other social actors, in which he opposed the "civil society" approach in which "two or three people create an organization" to "mobilize people and resources" for "doing projects, seeking social recognition, doing public welfare advocacy and policy influence."

Instead, following his approach based on what he called "traditional culture", he advocated devoting all the accumulated experience, forces, and resources into inducing the birth of great numbers of small groups of two to seven people, which would all do small things, and gradually, have the capacity to eventually do projects and form teams. For him, once people "follow the projects", it amounts to "follow the money". Then the attention and momentum of the people at the grass-roots level will be dispersed. With the state's policy of outsourcing public services to NGOs, a dynamic of professionalized competition for resources is generated, which kills the vitality of groups. "This so-called public interest is totally different from how we started, which came out of a pure intention in our hearts". Instead, it is the emotional forces of solidarity that could be found among grass-root team members that he was looking for and trying to build up in the Academy. This is in accordance with his emphasis that the Academy is not about anything specific. It is a general cultural project of rebuilding emotional closeness between people. For Wang, this is the fundamental task of Chinese volunteerism and welfare.

Wang compared his Academy to the Taiwanese Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassionate Relief Foundation, which is the largest NGO in the Chinese world (Lee forthcoming), which he had had some interactions with in relation to its projects in mainland China. Similar to the Academy, Tzu Chi's emphasis on volunteering and public service is so strong that it overshadows the religious inspiration behind it. Wang, mentioning that many had urged him to emulate the Tzu Chi model, stated that it wouldn't work in mainland China owing to its highly centralized organization. On the one hand, this would be interpreted by the government as "occupying the masses". On the other hand, describing China's authoritarian tradition in which authority is highly centralized but, far from the centers of power, people associate with each other in decentralized fashion, he hinted that Tzu Chi does not follow the decentralized nature of the Chinese grassroots, and suggested that Tzu Chi

turn its Taiwan spirit into self-forming small groups that rely on themselves. They might die, but it doesn't matter. [That would be] a true propagation of the spirit, transcending the influence of the specific socio-political conditions. In China, to do true public interest work, you need to exercise political and social judgement, but you also need to transcend it. You don't try to occupy or fight over the masses. Don't act under a unified name. In a small scale you can, for

the sake of convenience. But don't, because you have your own influence, try to raise your flag even higher… So it's very clear: don't have political ambitions or political goals. Then, as an individual, you have to start from a heart of cultivating *Dao*; this is very difficult.

Wang's organizational preference also reveals the "utopian" aspect of the Academy. Remaining largely unstructured, as an organization that had garnered significant public attention at one time, the Academy missed numerous opportunities for funding. It was not that his organization did not receive any attention from funding agencies. As his remarks reflect, this is his purposeful choice. At the expense of the Academy's financial sustainability and instrumental effectiveness, he chose a form that he thought could best maintain the intimate relationships between its participants. Thus, the utopianism of the Academy and many other groups lies not only in the fact that most participants know that their involvement with them would only be temporary, but also in the fact that the distancing from instrumental values renders those groups precarious.

And yet, this utopianism was also tied to a longer term vision. Wang expressed his faith in China's cultural and spiritual transformation in the long term, in which public interest groups could flourish. But for now, "it's enough to have your all-encompassing vision, and to avoid direct conflicts, such as '[the government] is restricting NGOs'" or advocating for constitutionalism. "If you confront [the government], you will wound it, and then what's going well with you will be wounded. You need transcendental wisdom".

Intimate utopias and anti-politics

In line with their anti-instrumental, anti-ideological, anti-institutional, pro-social group style, the volunteers we interviewed unequivocally deny that what they do or what they care about is political. Their stance can be compared to the "disavowing politics" observed by Bennett and her colleagues in their study of civic groups in Providence, RI, which they describe as the enactment of taboos against those aspects of the political considered to be polluted. These "provide a cultural mechanism to shelter commonly held democratic ideals from the ambiguities and contradictions of politics in practice". Politics is seen as messy, corrupt, and manipulative. Anti-politics thus becomes part of the moral code, "The creation of an implicit boundary between what is political (polluted) and what is civic (good)" (Bennett et al 2013, 531).

Bin Xu, in his study of Chinese post-quake volunteers, noted their aversion for political engagement or activism. For Xu, this "apathy" is a product of the state:

"…while all the volunteers expressed their sympathy for the affected people's suffering through their actions, many of them avoided talking about the causes of the suffering—for example, why schools collapsed. This silence and apathy can be explained by various political factors, such as censorship, suppression, and nationalism, which constituted a context conducive to a general inability to think about and talk about politically sensitive issues." (Xu 2017, 25).

Elsewhere, writes Xu, participants

> "failed to turn compassion for suffering into a serious political discussion and actions that addressed the causes of the suffering. This apathy was mainly a result of the repressive political context, which shaped peoples' words and thoughts not only through prohibitions but through a pervasive feeling of fear, a sense of helplessness, and an inability to speak about harsh reality … political conditions also prevented them from … moving from compassion to serious deliberation and political actions" (pp. 192–193).

Xu's account poignantly aligns with the dichotomy proposed by Eliasoph (2013) between "politically passive" volunteers and "public-spirited" activists in the United States. She notes that "Volunteers worked hard to keep [their] circle of concern small—in cultivating a sense of connection to each other, they curtailed their ability to learn about the wider world" (1998, p. 13). Through her research, she has shown how volunteering in the USA since the 1990s has become an apolitical form of social activity that is normatively distinct (though often hard to separate) from social activism (Eliasoph 2011, 2013). Studies of volunteers in other countries such as Italy (Muehlebach 2011, 2012), Russia (Hemment 2012, 2014) or Japan (Ogawa 2004) have also pointed out the depoliticized style and goals of much volunteer activity. Such studies, often drawing on theories of governmentality, argue that volunteering, as a form of institutionalized, unpaid helping labor, provides a space for the expression and management of emotion and compassion that is both an individualized space of freedom, care, emotional experience and self-development for volunteers, and a palliative and depoliticized outlet for mobilizing unpaid labor to address social problems by capitalist, socialist and authoritarian regimes.

This type of volunteering fits well into the strategies of governance of the post-reform Chinese Party-state, which has turned to volunteering as a means to re-energize its infrastructures of popular mobilization (Palmer and Winiger 2019; Palmer and Ning 2020). Chong (2011) has argued that these volunteering programs are a form of governmentality through which people voluntarily submit to the state's norms of model citizenship. Other recent studies of volunteering in China have also explored the mutual accommodations between the individual agency of volunteers and the state-directed structures within which much volunteering is organized (Rolandsen 2008; Luova 2011; Fleisher 2011, p. 318). Much discussion and debate revolve around whether the dynamic relationships between private freedoms and state control in China reinforce or undermine the power of the regime.

Similar to the literature on civil society, much of the literature on volunteerism in China thus explicitly or implicitly adopts a state-centered frame, presenting volunteers as either passive subjects of technologies of governance or active agents resisting or negotiating with the state. In this article, however, we do not frame volunteer agency through the interplay between an all-pervasive governmentality and a purposeful individual agency. We have discussed elsewhere how devoted volunteers reject the neo-liberal mode of subjectivation, which implies a form of instrumental rationality in the pursuit of defined goals for personal gains (Ning & Palmer 2020, 396).

Our research leads us to question the discourse of volunteer "apathy" that suggests that the only genuine form of civic engagement is political activism and dismisses "nice, warm, and helpful" apolitical forms—"Do good deeds; show your compassion; feel good about yourself; and don't worry about things you can't change" (Xu 2017, p. 199). In the words of Eliasoph, apolitical volunteers "missed a chance to ignite that magical kind of power that can sparkle between people when they self-reflectively organize themselves" (1998, p. 230). What they lack, says Eliasoph, is a sociological imagination *a la* Mills that would allow them to "connect the dots" and think about the political forces that cause the problems they try to solve through their volunteering (1998, p. 13, 2013, p. 45).

Our goal, however, is not to assess how well volunteers practice sociology or live up to the ideal of the American worker speaking up in Norman Rockwell's 1948 iconic painting *Freedom of Speech*. While the effects of authoritarianism, as described by Xu, are very real, Chinese volunteers' engagement cannot be described only in terms of lack, apathy or deficiency. While the political system, in either liberal or authoritarian contexts, deeply shapes different modes of apolitical engagement, volunteers' apolitical stance should also be understood on its own terms, without merely dismissing it because they do not conform to liberal or sociological expectations of how civil society actors ought to behave. What we find is that rather than being "apathetic", i.e., lacking pathos or feeling, Chinese volunteers attempt to create an alternative emotional space of feeling that embodies social ideals.

Volunteers' non-political stance may represent more than a fear of repression or the mere pursuit of personal gains. In the cases we have studied, it expresses deep passions that keep numerous people avidly volunteering, sometimes even "in the closet" (Ning & Palmer 2020). By creating "intimate utopias", these volunteers strive to form non-instrumental, egalitarian, and trustful relationships with those whom they serve and with other volunteers. In fact, it is in these terms of intimacy that many volunteers in China come to understand and *value* their volunteering experiences. For the volunteers we studied, being non-political is not a discursive tactic or strategy but a fundamental aspect of their moral code; as such, their apolitical stance can be deemed *anti*-political. This invites comparison—noting similarities and differences—with studies of the "disavowal of politics" in many American civil society groups (Bennett et al 2013; Eliasoph 1996, 1997; Carlsson and Manning 2010). The Chinese volunteers' avoidance of politics is a core component of their moral code; and may even go deeper: in the Rhode Island cases studied by Bennett and her colleagues, activists who advanced political projects *rhetorically* distanced themselves from politics, because to *appear* political might undermine the popular acceptance and legitimacy of their causes. The Chinese volunteers whom we interviewed, in contrast, not only *perform* their volunteerism anti-politically, they also *value* it anti-politically.

We do not suggest that these "anti-political" groups have no political significance at all. The aims of all of the organizations we have studied point to the inadequacy of the Chinese government in certain aspects: exclusion of migrant workers' children from urban public education, insufficiency of post-disaster aid, or the weakening of society's moral fabric. Moreover, the existence of these associations in a grey area is already a challenge to NGO regulations in China. When we say that these

associations are anti-political, we mean that their participants explicitly keep a distance from activism. Actions with overtly political connotations, such as advocacy through social media, protests, or large-scale mobilizations are not used or even planned by these groups. Rather, our aim here is to show how, for the volunteers we have studied, anti-politics is an intrinsic value that deliberately finds its expression by avoiding actions with political connotations; it is more than ignoring social reality or passive avoidance. Their anti-politics is part of a broader pattern of negotiating moral boundaries between their own pursuit of civic intimacy and other social spheres where such norms do not prevail. The values of civic intimacy can reveal some of the factors that contribute to the persistence and attractiveness of civil society groups, despite their precarity and marginality in contemporary China.

Other forms of anti-politics in China

In his recent study of Chinese grassroots intellectuals, Sebastian Veg discusses how grassroots initiatives, since the 1990s, have increasingly focused on the local, the lived, the practical and the intimate—in an almost conscious desire to avoid engagement with the state, either in a positive or a negative way. They try to avoid being caught up in a political logic of supporting or opposing the state. One of the leading grassroots intellectuals of the 1990s, Wang Xiaobo, in an essay entitled "the silent majority" (*Chenmo de daduoshu*) criticised Chinese intellectuals' propensity to speak out, to always want to have a voice on everything; because speaking out itself is an exercise of the will to power. For Wang, keeping silent is the only way to protect humanity from the encroachment of politics. He was thus described as an intellectual indifferent to the state, neither its enemy nor its ally (Veg 2019, pp. 19-20; Wang 1997). Even then, Wang and other like-minded intellectuals are hardly silent given their writing and participation in public debates, no matter how low-key or localized. The groups we have presented in this article, on the other hand, are not public intellectuals; to an even greater degree they carry out the antipolitical values articulated by Wang.

Other forms of anti-politics can be identified in other studies on a variety of Chinese social groups and movements. For example, Mayfair Yang, in her recent study of folk religion in Zhejiang province and its relation to debates on civil society (Yang 2020), proposes a dual conception of civil society. The first is "a plurality of organizational principles that both diversifies and knits together the social fabric of a society without relying on state organs. This pluralization enables self-initiating and self-governing groups and communities to form, interact, and stimulate each other". The second conception refers to "social activism and critique, propelled by a modern reflexive social awareness and opposition to existing power structures. Here civil society is the conscious will of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to actively work for social change through explicit agendas, strategies, and targets" (pp. 264–265). While most discourses and studies of civil society focus on this latter type, Yang shows the empirical importance of the first type in the realm of traditional religious and clan associations (see also Palmer 2019). She also shows their theoretical significance for agency within civil society: an anarchic plurality

of forms, rather than the standardized template of NGOs seeking to engage with the state as a key interlocutor.

The volunteers and groups we discuss in this article are vastly different from the folk religious groups studied by Yang, even if they share an anti-political orientation. Closer to our case are the groups of practitioners of physical exercises in a public square studied by Isabelle Thireau (2020) in her recent ethnography of public gatherings in China, as well as the groups of dancing seniors studied by Justine Rochot (2019). As periodic but loose gatherings, the groups studied by Thireau and Rochot have strong norms to create spaces of personal freedom and convenience, separate from the worlds of family, politics, of work, or of any other type of relationships characterized by hierarchies or obligations. What they seek is a space of familiarity, in which everyone is free to join or leave as they wish (Thireau 2020, p. 77). The freedom to come and go, and to maintain personal distances between participants, seem stronger in the moral code of the exercise groups studied by Thireau than the volunteers we focus on here—which have a stronger emphasis on emotional ties—but we find a common search for spaces of familiarity unaffected by instrumental relations and formal hierarchies.

The cases studied by Veg, Yang, Thireau and Rochot show that anti-politics can be found in a huge diversity of groups and movements in China. Their values may be different from the moral code of civic intimacy that characterizes the groups we have focused on here, but there are also overlaps between them. For each of these groups, anti-political attitudes and orientations are modes of both resisting incorporation into the state and avoiding the risks of engaging in antagonistic postures. Thus, they all seek to embody different civic values of solidarity that have broader import for society, but they remain inwardly or locally focused, carefully maintaining and negotiating their boundaries with other spheres of society. What emerges is a picture of a civil sphere that is fragmented, pluralistic, and centrifugal in its dynamics.

Anti-politics under Eastern European post-totalitarianism

The anti-politics of the Chinese volunteers in the cases we have discussed here invites comparison with anti-political sentiments that existed in some quarters of civil society in communist Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s (Ciżewska-Martyńska 2015). Following the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968, Eastern Europe had entered a "post-totalitarian" phase that has some parallels with socialist China at the twilight of the post-Mao reform period.

The most succinct expression of the anti-political values can be found in the work of Vaclav Havel, who wrote that

> I favor 'anti-politics', that is, politics not as the technology of power and manipulation, of cybernetic rule over humans or as the art of the useful, but politics as one of the ways of seeing and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them. I favor politics as practical morality, as ser-

vice to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans. It is, I presume, an approach which, in this world, is extremely impractical and difficult to apply in daily life. Still, I know no better alternative. (Havel 1987, p. 155)

Havel located this "humanly measured care" in what he called the "invisible sphere" of the "independent life of society", not a sphere of political thought or discourse. "They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity" by enacting an authentic morality (Havel 2018[1978], pp. 370–371). The volunteers we studied in China could be counted among those "ordinary citizens" rather than the artists highlighted by Havel—although one of our interviewees, speaking of how most people couldn't understand why he would commit so much time to his volunteering, compared his mundane teaching in the Hong School to the avant-garde rock bands of 1980s Beijing. The following words of Havel could be said to express the ideals of many of the Chinese volunteers we interviewed:

> …the elementary need of human beings to live, to a certain extent at least, in harmony with themselves, that is, to live in a bearable way, not to be humiliated by their superiors, not to be continually watched by the police, to be able to express themselves freely, to find an outlet for this creativity, to enjoy their creativity, and so on… Abstract projects for an ideal political or economic order do not interest them… not only because everyone knows how little chance they have of succeeding, but because people feel that the less political policies are derived from a concrete here and now, the more they fix their sights on an abstract 'someday', the more easily they can degenerate into new forms of enslavement. (Havel 2018[1978], p. 376)

Havel nonetheless emphasized the potential of this anti-politics to potentially trigger major political change. This implication, however, is difficult to detect in the anti-politics of Chinese volunteers. Havel characterized this invisible sphere as "living in truth," which, by the mere fact of not replicating the "automatism of the system" and its pervasive lies, would "allow the virus of truth" to "slowly spread through the tissue of the life of lies, gradually causing it to disintegrate" (p. 371). Havel's moral code of "truth" vs. "lies" presents a stark moral choice in which, ultimately, civil society is in an existential battle with the post-totalitarian system, even if the battle is played out through simple, apolitical acts such as a brewery employee trying to improve the quality of his beer and, finding his efforts stymied by the system, finds himself unwittingly thrust into an existential battle to simply be himself (Havel 2018[1978], pp. 383–384).

Havel's starkly binary formulation of moral struggle—earning him and others the title of "dissidents"—might have been a response to the extreme rigidity of Eastern European communism. China, however, has developed a much more flexible brand of neo-socialist "post-totalitarianism" in which, for those who eschew political dissidence and activism, there remain plenty of spaces for self-expression (Palmer and Winiger 2019). What the Chinese volunteers seek is not so much "living in truth" in opposition to a system of lies, but "living in authenticity" in a system that distorts

human relationships into instrumental exchanges or political performances (Sum 2017). But rather than focusing on "the continuing and cruel tension between the complex demands of that system and the aims of life" (Havel 2018[1978], p. 376), they seek to create their own intimate spaces, within which such tensions would be minimized.

The anti-politics of the Chinese "intimate utopias" we have studied thus do not appear to have, as anticipated by Havel, the potential for becoming a politically significant oppositional movement. In terms of Wright's concept of "real utopias" (2010), they are real in the sense that they exist in the here and now rather than in an abstract vision of the future—but, given their resistance to institutionalization, they do not lead to stable and sustained forms for the realization of an alternative social ideal.

The Chinese voluntary fellowships are also different from the Israeli social clubs studied by Danny Kaplan (2018). Kaplan sees the intimacy of small groups as helping to create an authentic sense of national solidarity that transcends abstract constructions of collective identity, both by providing models of intimate bonds between fellow citizens, and by creating friendships that extend beyond the small groups. While figures such as Mu and Wang, whose ideas we have discussed above, may well have hoped for their groups to have this effect, the strong moral boundaries the groups create between themselves and the social mainstream, and their legal pre-carity, limit their capacity to have scaling and multiplier effects on social solidarity.

Conclusion

Jeffrey Alexander has called for a more systematic sociological interpretation and explanation of solidarity (Alexander 2006a, b, p. 3). "Feelings for others matter, and they are structured by the boundaries of solidarity," he writes. And these feelings have a utopian dimension: "Solidarity is possible because people are oriented not only to the here and now but to the ideal, to the transcendent, to what they hope will be everlasting."

In the intimate utopias described here, we find small groups that try to create solidarity in an embodied way, through a civic intimacy that finds its own source and justification through the emotional relationships and joy that it brings its participants. In that sense, it is more immanent than a transcendent, abstract value; it is an ideal that comes to be embodied in the process of humans relating to each other. As micro-civil spheres, the voluntary fellowships that we have studied negotiate their boundaries with the "profane" world of instrumental and political relations by focusing on their own intimacy and by, perhaps, hoping that by osmosis, their values might gradually influence the other spheres of society. Paradoxically, since the state claims a monopoly over transcendent values and bars the door to the institutional construction of forms of alternative solidarities, it strengthens the value of intimacy as the source of authentic social relations. In the cases we present here, volunteers elaborate a utopian code of civic intimacy that is paradoxical, in that it is compelled by the political context, but it also taps into authentic feelings and

utopian aspirations. This paradox creates an even stronger desire to create a space of autonomy that avoids or minimizes interactions with the state.

The intimate utopia is to some extent a product of authoritarianism: a retreat into intimacy, away from political taboos and restrictions—but it goes beyond that, becoming a space for the pursuit and expression of an alternative moral code that seeks its authenticity outside of institutional and political arrangements. By stressing the volunteers' own interpretations of their experiences in these "utopias", we suggest that the neo-Tocquevillean framework commonly used to make sense of civil society in China and elsewhere, which sees such groups largely as representatives of society facing varied levels of antagonism and incorporation from the state—or as irrelevant when dynamics of antagonism are not present --, is inadequate to fully grasp the sociological import and theoretical significance of these groups. The state is but one of the spheres whose norms they resist. These volunteers do not pit themselves against the state, nor do they explicitly support it, but actively seek to enact modes of social relating that run against the grain of the dominant modes of sociality—instrumental relations or norms of traditional or political reciprocity—that prevail in multiple social spaces in China, including the family, the workplace, ordinary friendships, and political hierarchies. Their utopian "resistance" to these modes of sociality finds expression not through intellectual critiques, social or cultural activism, negotiation with state actors, policy proposals, or programs of social reform, but through the enactment of authenticity in embodied and affective social relations. This solidarity is always evanescent, but it can always be rekindled, in the connections within small groups of people, even when the formal institutions of civil society are suppressed or fully incorporated into the state. It is a solidarity that seeks freedom and autonomy within the relations people create among themselves.

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