

Volunteerism among Chinese University Students (2010–2025): A Review of Participation Patterns and Influencing Factors

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i4/28034>

Published Date: 16 April 2026

Abstract

Volunteer service has become an important avenue through which Chinese university students participate in civic affairs and engage in experiential learning. This study maps the research landscape of volunteering among Chinese university students from two main perspectives: patterns of participation and the determinants shaping such participation. The existing literature reveals several structural characteristics of volunteer participation among Chinese university students. Although the range of volunteer activities has expanded considerably, services that require specialized professional skills remain underrepresented. Moreover, channels for obtaining information about volunteering opportunities are still relatively limited, and participation is often characterized by intermittent or short-term engagement. Research generally identifies several key factors influencing volunteer participation, including students' civic cognition and value orientations, institutional arrangements, mobilization mechanisms, and the availability of organisational support. Empirical findings also suggest positive associations between volunteering and students' competency development, contributions to community governance, and the strengthening of moral and civic education within higher education institutions. While the literature has attempted to assess the applicability of established Western theoretical frameworks within the Chinese context, it also highlights contextual dynamics that are not fully captured by Western-centered approaches. Nevertheless, current research continues to exhibit several limitations, including restricted sample coverage, insufficient theoretical localisation, and a relative lack of practice-oriented empirical evidence. Future studies would benefit from greater attention to underrepresented student groups, the adoption of longitudinal research designs, the development of more

context-sensitive theoretical frameworks, and the exploration of more effective intervention strategies and collaborative mechanisms.

Keywords: Volunteerism, Chinese College Students, Civic Engagement, Higher Education, Literature Review

Introduction

Student volunteer services have become a particularly prominent feature of moral education in Chinese higher education. It lies at the intersection of moral education and practice (Hu et al., 2023), and its normative significance has been repeatedly emphasized in policy discussions (Lü et al., 2024). Apart from the pedagogical role of student volunteering, this practice is also considered a key area for the education of the labor force and the development of the social responsibility of youth (Chen, Li, & Li, 2023). The scope of student volunteering has continued to grow in recent years. According to the national statistical data of 2019, of the 210 million registered volunteers in China, students formed a significant and increasingly visible part of the national volunteering population (Hu et al., 2023).

Over the past fifteen years, studies of student volunteering in China have moved progressively from macro-level policy discourse to mechanisms-oriented and micro-level analysis (Zhang & Lin, 2008). The bibliometric analysis suggests that there is a staged development in this body of research, including an initial exploratory phase (2002-2007), a phase of rapid development driven by significant public events such as the Beijing Olympic Games and the Wenchuan earthquake (2008-2016), and a third phase of consolidation in practical education and institutional arrangements (2017-2022) (Fan, 2023). The body of research in this area peaked in terms of quantity in 2016, when there were 64 academic papers published in core journals, and has since maintained a stable rate of around 36 papers annually (Fan, 2023).

This review synthesizes the results of over 200 studies, including 40 articles from key scholarly publications. Using a literature-based approach, the review will examine the existing body of knowledge on the phenomenon of volunteering among Chinese university students from 2010 to 2025. Relevant studies will be retrieved from key academic databases such as CNKI, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using keywords related to the phenomenon of "college student volunteerism," "youth volunteering," and "civic engagement among college students in China." Relevant studies will be systematically examined to determine the main themes of research in the domain, the methodology used in the studies, and the trends in the domain. This review will serve as a reference point for future studies and will be instrumental in the development of effective service strategies for university students in China.

Multiple Functions of Volunteer Service

Promotion of Individual Development

A substantial volume of research supports the idea that volunteering is associated with the personal development of college students along various aspects, including the enhancement of skills, psychological growth, and the creation of social capital.

Firstly, studies that examine volunteering in terms of specialized skills, such as teaching assistance, reveal that challenging service environments play an important role in personal growth. For example, Wang (2022) shows that volunteering in environments characterized by

scarce resources and high workload can lead to self-exploration and the acquisition of skills, especially in terms of communication between different social groups and project leadership. Quantitative studies reveal that long-term volunteering is linked to high levels of social trust ($r = 0.284$), perceptions of influencing the community ($r = 0.233$), and civic responsibility, suggesting that volunteering is an avenue that promotes the creation of social capital (Pevnaya et al., 2022).

Secondly, the literature increasingly explores the relationship between volunteering and students' academic and career-related outcomes. Generally, the results of the empirical studies indicate the existence of a positive relationship between the frequency of volunteering and the quality of academic performance and employment. For example, in the case of volunteering experience, Cai and Zhou (2025) indicate that the experience significantly enhances the willingness of rural college students to return to their hometown for employment; the relationship is more significant in the case of student leaders. Chen et al. (2023) indicate that volunteering helps develop teamwork skills, although the relationship with personal and collective responsibility is not consistent in all student groups. Moreover, volunteering is positively associated with public service motivation; self-efficacy and moral identity play the roles of partial mediator and chain mediation, respectively (He et al., 2025). The results of the research on moral education and mental health indicate the existence of a modestly positive relationship between volunteering participation and psychosocial well-being. These results indicate that the structure of volunteering participation may affect the level of the realized developmental benefits.

Social and Educational Effects

College student volunteer service has various social functions, including tackling structural issues and contributing to the optimization of the pattern of governance. In the context of the relationship between the city and the countryside, teaching assistance programs can provide a platform for more egalitarian interactions between city and countryside students, subtly subverting the traditional dualistic pattern of city–rural relationships that has long existed in China (Wang, 2022). At the social level, volunteer service can allow students to come into contact with grassroots society and contribute to the optimization of the pattern of governance (Xiong, 2024). Student environmental protection programs can allow for participation in global climate action, while elderly care programs can provide essential youthful labor forces to address the problems of an aging population (Xin et al., 2026; Chen et al., 2024). During public health emergencies, anti-epidemic volunteer service can contribute to the optimization of the health system. At the same time, practical volunteer service programs such as urban management volunteer service can contribute to the optimization of departmental relationships and enhance inter-departmental collaboration (Shi et al., 2021; Huang, 2022).

Volunteer service has important educational value. As a form of labor education, it can provide a long-term way of cultivating talent and meet the long-term goals of educational reform and economic development (Chen et al., 2023). At the university level, volunteer service can be an important innovation in the pattern of moral education, raising the attractiveness and efficiency of the implementation of ideological and political education programs (Lv et al., 2024). The “Four Hundred” Lei Feng volunteer service models can provide guidance, teaching materials, and behavior models to enhance the level of students' moral

knowledge and civic awareness (Xiong, 2024). At the same time, performance-oriented volunteer service can contribute to the internationalization of university campuses by promoting interplay and social integration between domestic and international students (O'Neil et al., 2023).

Volunteer service can contribute to the development of citizens' capabilities even in an authoritarian political context. Although it is not necessary for the volunteers to develop a sense of political accountability, they can develop capabilities to deal with social issues and find appropriate ways to address these issues. Therefore, they can develop differentiated civic skills that can have an impact on their civic engagement with society. As noted by Teets et al. (2022), civic skills can be developed among the participants of volunteer service. However, it should be noted that not all volunteer service can contribute to civic development, particularly when it is compulsory or instrumental. Overall, the above observations suggest that volunteering among college students can be a complex form of social practice that can produce social value, have moral and educational value, and can even contribute to the civic development of the participants. The civic development of the participants depends on a number of conditions.

Characteristics of Volunteer Service by Chinese College Students

In the last fifteen years or so, the pattern of university student volunteering in China has shown signs of development in increasingly complex ways. On the one hand, there is diversity in the types of participation; on the other hand, there are some specific difficulties in practice, such as the tendency towards information channelization and the lack of sustainability in participation. All these aspects are closely related and affect the entire landscape of student volunteering. Besides this, there are some specific features among different student groups and the impact of social and external factors. All these aspects should be taken into account while analyzing this issue in more detail.

In reference to the types of participation, university student volunteering is characterized by a relatively clear hierarchical structure; however, this structure is subject to some changes depending on the external conditions. According to the recent statistics and data, the most popular types of student volunteering are community service activities (54.9%), cultural and sports activities (56.3%), and donation-related activities (46.4%), while more specific types of service activities, such as providing help with teaching (23.0%) and environmental protection (14.8%), are not so popular. However, there is an important nuance: this hierarchy is not permanent and may vary under the impact of external events. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an impressive growth in environmental protection activities, elderly care activities, and anti-epidemic activities. All these aspects are closely related to the impact of external events on the choice of types of service volunteering. As Chen et al. (2024) and Xin et al. (2026) have noted, there are some specific changes in the hierarchy of volunteering types depending on external events. The flexibility of student volunteering is an issue that requires more specific attention from researchers.

All of the above aspects suggest that the pattern of volunteering among college students in China is structured and fluid at the same time. Although certain patterns of participation can be identified, they depend on the prevailing circumstances and the level of motivation of the students.

Unlike the pattern of participation in volunteering activities, the pattern of acquiring information about such activities is highly concentrated. However, this pattern of concentration varies from one category of college students to another. Organized channels of acquiring information about volunteering activities appear to be dominant. The Communist Youth League (CYL) is the core channel of information acquisition regarding volunteering activities. It plays a significant role in the mobilization of university student volunteers (Geng et al., 2022). According to the empirical data, 40.0% of college students acquire information about volunteering through school notifications. Social media and online platforms are the secondary sources of information acquisition about volunteering activities, which cover 21.0% and 20.1% of the students, respectively. Recommendations from relatives and friends through informal channels contribute only 2.6% to the overall information acquisition (Hu et al., 2023).

This reliance on organized channels is similarly influenced by the demographics of the students. International students have been observed to rely on institutionalized channels such as university recruitment and registration with volunteer organizations (Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). On the other hand, domestic students from rural backgrounds have been observed to rely on channels such as assistance programs and service projects facilitated by their respective universities (Cai & Zhou, 2025). This similarly indicates the continued relevance of the reliance on organized channels in the promotion of student volunteer participation.

However, the issue that is of even greater interest and concern is the limited persistence of student volunteer participation, which has been described as the "high willingness-low persistence paradox." Although 66% of the student population has the experience of engaging in volunteer activities, only 56% have the intention of continuing the practice, while 11% have the reluctance of engaging in the practice (Zhang & Feng, 2022). Regional data similarly indicates the existence of this paradox. At Rizhao City in Shandong Province, for instance, 94.01% of the students at the respective universities have the experience of engaging in volunteer activities. However, 45.22% of the student population has only done this between one and three times (Wang & Ge, 2025).

It should be noted that it is important to recognize that high initial participation rates do not automatically translate to long-term engagement. The above considerations include the level of voluntariness of participation, the extent to which students' interests are associated with the nature of service activities, and the quality of organizational support. The above limitations indicate that it may not be enough to simply increase the number of volunteering opportunities to foster civic engagement among college students.

Overall, the above findings indicate that while Chinese college students participate in a diverse array of volunteer activities, the high dependence on a small number of formal volunteering channels and the durability-limited nature of engagement appear to be important issues. The above issues can be addressed by considering not only the number of volunteering opportunities but also the quality of the volunteering participation experience.

The main influencing factors of college students' participation in volunteer services Individual-level factors: cognition, skills, personality and cultural values

Cognition, as a prerequisite, is not directly related to behavior. Rather, the role of cognition is mediated by a variety of factors. The results of the study showed that the level of understanding of the personal and social importance of the volunteer service is a robust predictor of the attitude ($\beta = 0.694$), subjective norms ($\beta = 0.483$), and perceived behavioral control ($\beta = 0.120$). The overall effect of these factors is 0.404 (Hu et al., 2023). The path analysis identified four indirect paths: the indirect path through the attitude and behavioral intention (0.122), the progressive path from the subjective norms to the behavioral intention (0.095), the indirect path through the perceived behavioral control and the behavioral intention (0.086), and the direct path from the perceived behavioral control and the behavior (0.102) (Hu et al., 2023).

However, the cognitive understanding of the importance of the volunteer service is not enough for the engagement of the students in the activity. For example, the cognitive understanding of the importance of the volunteer service may be limited only to the level of helping others without considering the fundamental principle of mutual assistance.

Skills. Social-affective-behavioral skills are an additional important factor that can help us understand the participation of volunteers. Research has shown that perspective-taking skills ($d = 0.356$) and abstract thinking skills ($d = 0.309$) positively predict students' engagement in service activities. Moreover, stress regulation skills ($d = 0.379-0.703$) were found to significantly differentiate between volunteers who consistently meet participation criteria and those who do not. (Sewell et al., 2023)

These skills enable students to balance their school obligations with their obligations to service. They are also useful skills that can serve as resources during uncertain times or in relation to unforeseen public events. Without these skills, students, even if motivated to participate, might not be able to do so consistently.

It is important to note that the distribution of these skills is not equally present in all individuals. This is to say that not all individuals have sufficient social-affective-behavioral skills that might limit their ability to participate in volunteer activities. It is in this context that an intervention that works on both cognitive understanding and social-affective-behavioral skills might provide an assured solution.

Personality. Personality traits, in this context, function as fairly stable predictors of volunteer behavior. For instance, agreeableness was found to contribute to service motivation, thereby indirectly influencing participation in volunteer activities (Chen & Su, 2025). Psychological capital, moreover, was found to affect volunteer behavior in both direct and indirect ways, including indirectly via motivational mechanisms, whereas perceived social support and volunteer motivation form a sequential pathway that ultimately affects participation (Xu et al., 2021).

However, personality traits, as previously discussed, do not, in themselves, guarantee sustained engagement in volunteer activities. For instance, even though individuals may exhibit high levels of agreeableness or psychological capital, these traits may be ineffective in ensuring sustained engagement in volunteer activities in contexts in which institutional

support is limited. Under these circumstances, it is apparent that contextual conditions play a pivotal role.

From this perspective, it is imperative to understand how personality traits, in association with motivational, social, and institutional factors, can be effectively addressed in order to promote sustained engagement in volunteer activities.

Cultural Values. Cultural values affect volunteers through the interplay between tradition and modernity. The findings from surveys suggest that the relationship is affected by outcomes in moral education and mental health, with the benefits of volunteering potentially being maximized depending on the frequency and duration of volunteering and the mode of engagement (Lv et al., 2024).

In this context of cultural values, Confucian values such as unity and harmony have been found to have a significant effect on volunteering behavior and have been identified as predictors of volunteering. The findings suggest that the role of functional motivation is significant in this context. However, there is no significant effect of family-oriented values on volunteering behavior (Guo et al., 2021). The effect of unity and harmony is consistent across both genders and suggests that similar structural processes are at play in volunteering behavior among both male and female students (Guo et al., 2021).

In terms of the ideological context, socialist core values, the red revolutionary spirit, and aspects of traditional Chinese culture are embedded in the labor education system. The effect of these value systems is indirect and is seen in the way in which they affect the motivations and perceived benefits of volunteering among students (He et al., 2023). The effect of religious beliefs is also seen in the context of volunteering and charitable donation behavior (Xie et al., 2020).

It should be noted that not all students are exposed to cultural values and that not all students perceive them as relevant and are enabled to act on them. Personality and cultural values are complex and interdependent and affect volunteering behavior in different contexts.

Social and Institutional Factors: Norms, Trust, Mobilization, and Network Influence

Subjective Norms. Subjective norms play an important role in the intentions of students for participating in volunteer activities ($\beta = 0.397$). The norms are further supported by the influence of the family, peers, and the college environment, thus enhancing the intentions of the students for participation (Hu et al., 2023). Social motivations are higher in students who come from families that have a strong tradition of volunteering (Wang & Ge, 2025). The immediate influence of the family and peers also plays an important role in shaping the participation of the students. The parents' participation in volunteering can provide opportunities for their children to become familiar with the concept of volunteering (He et al., 2023; Wang & Ge, 2025).

Demographic and educational factors are also important determinants of the influence of subjective norms. For example, altruistic motivations are higher in females ($M = 4.82$) compared to their male counterparts ($M = 4.21$). The influence of volunteering on the intentions of rural students for returning to their hometowns for work is also evident, where 55.97% of the students clearly intend to do so. Liberal arts students are higher (58.19%)

compared to their counterparts from the sciences (55.22%) (Cai & Zhou, 2025). Among minority nursing students, the participation in volunteering has been linked to the development of professional skills and the passing down of cultural heritage (Chen, 2024).

The influence of subjective norms differs for different types of service in volunteering activities. In the case of elderly-care volunteering, attitudes are the strongest predictors of participation, and the influence of personality traits is seen indirectly through norms and attitudes (Chen et al., 2024). It must be recognized that the influence of subjective norms alone is not enough for the participation of individuals; rather, there must be an integration of the norms and the opportunities for self-development in the participation in volunteer activities.

Institutional Trust. Institutional trust is an important external factor that influences volunteering, especially in collectivist societies (odds ratio = 1.45). Positive cues, such as government support and organizational openness, can trigger trust that reduces individuals' perceptions of volunteering participation risk (Xu & Zhang, 2023).

In China, the services provided by volunteers take place in an environment that is shaped by the interplay between three institutional logics. Bureaucratic logic extends government influences vertically to facilitate the spread of volunteer services. Professional logic focuses on the application of knowledge and skills to ensure the accuracy of service provision. Lastly, community logic focuses on recognition, solidarity, and social integration. All these logics create an organic structure that influences volunteer participation (Huang, 2022).

In terms of macro-level influences, political systems play an important role in influencing participation. For instance, in China, volunteering among college students is carried out within the framework of government mobilization. This is in contrast with many Western societies, where volunteering participation is initiated by the people. This difference in structure is likely to affect not just the type of participation but also the benefits associated with volunteering (Hustinx et al., 2012).

Institutional trust is not enough to ensure participation. This is because it is subject to the perception of the institutions as legitimate, the congruence between the goals of the institutions and the values of the students, and the availability of opportunities to participate. From this understanding, it is important that mechanisms that foster institutional trust among college students in China are put in place. At the same time, mechanisms that help students feel that they can exert agency in their volunteering activities need to be put in place.

National Mobilization. On one hand, it has a positive effect on volunteering by providing guidance for policy and the necessary institutional support for the expansion of volunteering activities (Zhao & Lilly, 2022). Conversely, bureaucratic approaches to national mobilization may cause formality, undermine the authenticity of volunteer engagement, and even evoke resistance among the people involved (Teets et al., 2022).

Moreover, it has been found that volunteer programs initiated by citizens, where individual autonomy and initiative are emphasized, have a greater potential for creating a positive effect on democracy than state-led approaches to volunteer mobilization (Teets et al., 2022). For instance, some students may not be satisfied with the formality of national

volunteer programs and may prefer to have a volunteer engagement that has a greater sense of authenticity and individual motivation (Zhang & Lin, 2008).

It can be concluded that the most effective approach to national mobilization would be one that maintains a balance between formality and individual initiative. From this point of view, it can be argued that such an approach would be most likely to evoke authenticity and sustainability in volunteer engagement.

Network carriers. Peer networks hold a pivotal position in the propagation of volunteering behavior. With respect to environmental volunteering behavior, existing studies have revealed that peer influence is more significant than homophily, with an influence to selection ratio of 2.64 (Xin et al., 2026). The results suggest that volunteering behavior is more likely to propagate through existing social connections rather than the formation of friendships based on behavioral preferences.

In this context, the rise of social media has introduced significant changes in the propagation of peer influence. An increased level of social media use is known to enhance peer influence, though not to an extent that alters friendship formation significantly (Xin et al., 2026). Additionally, social self-efficacy is partially responsible for facilitating peer influence among individuals. The results suggest that peer influence may propagate indirectly by enhancing an individual's self-efficacy.

However, peer influence is not equally applicable to all students. Individuals who are not closely connected with active social connections are not expected to benefit from peer influence. Therefore, an integrative approach that encompasses peer networks, social media, and self-efficacy may hold significant potential in promoting sustainable volunteering behavior.

Organizational and project-level factors: Support, Leadership and Mechanism

Project quality and organizational support. Project quality and organizational support have a direct influence on the sustainability of volunteer participation. More precisely, the alignment of the project to the students' professional or academic needs, alongside the quality of feedback, represents essential programme features that directly affect the sustainability of volunteer participation, both in terms of duration and the students' potential to participate in similar activities in the future (Wang & Ge, 2025).

Finally, organizational embedding presents a pattern of sustainability. More precisely, students who have not been members of a youth organization display a significantly higher refusal rate to participate in similar volunteer activities in the future (58%), in comparison to students who have already been embedded within organizational structures (18%) (Zhang & Feng, 2022). Furthermore, students who display low social activity rates, alongside students who find themselves at the higher or lower end of material conditions, display higher rates of dropping out of volunteer activities (Zhang & Feng, 2022).

Finally, from a governance point of view, procedural fairness appears to play an important role. More precisely, transparent evaluation procedures, individualized training schemes, and

reward schemes that combine material and non-material incentives may have a positive effect on the sustainability of volunteer motivation, reducing the potential for participant dropout.

Leadership and mechanism. However, at the organizational level, authentic leadership and organizational climate are significant factors in influencing volunteers' behavior in two ways: directly and indirectly, through the medium of psychological capital (Wu & Xu, 2022). What is noteworthy is that family care enhances the indirect route, suggesting that the organizational route is mediated by students' family-based emotional resources and not in isolation (Wu & Xu, 2022).

Under the umbrella of large-scale events, motivation and psychological contract of volunteers are significant predictors of continuous engagement and have a joint impact on volunteers' satisfaction and future engagement intentions (Wang & Yu, 2015). At the institutional level, the "base-based + project-based" model followed by universities is a model of operation that can help in the standardization and development of volunteers' work (Liu et al., 2025).

Theoretical Application and Research Methods

Core Theoretical Framework

Currently, most of the research is based on well-known theories from the West, which are selectively adapted and applied in the Chinese context. The application of these theories is not accidental and is closely associated with the global dominance of the mainstream volunteering literature and the need to apply these theories in the state-organized mobilization environment.

Speaking of the micro level, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is the most commonly used theory in the explanation of the decision-making processes of individuals. The TPB has been further developed by adding the "cognitive" element and has resulted in the creation of the multi-stage path of "cognition → attitude/subjective norms/perceived behavioral control → behavioral intention → behavior" that clearly describes the logic of the formation of Chinese college students' volunteering (Hu et al., 2023).

Another approach is based on the application of the Social Capital Theory. Instead of the formation of the intention of volunteering, the main focus is placed on the impact of volunteering: volunteering leads to the creation of trust, internalization of civic duty, and the accumulation of relational capital through the practice of volunteering (Pevnaya et al., 2022; Xiong, 2024). The shift from the intention-based approach is significant in the context of the conceptualization of volunteering as not only a voluntary activity but as a social practice.

Significant varieties of theoretical approaches have been applied to explain the relationship between macro-institutional structures and individuals' micro-level experiences. The Social Heuristic Hypothesis, for example, has been applied to explain the role of institutional trust by suggesting that well-functioning institutions have the capacity to internalize norms of cooperation in the prosocial heuristics used by individuals (Xu & Zhang, 2023). Conversely, Self-Shaping Theory and Prefigurative Political Theory have received relatively little attention to the role of institutional trust and have focused more on the construction of meaning. The application of this latter theoretical approach to the setting of teaching assistance projects highlights the way in which experiences of hardship or "suffering"

can be sites for the construction of youthful idealism and the formation of individuals' moral self (Wang, 2022). From this viewpoint, not all volunteering experiences can be understood as easy civic engagement; some can be understood as moral trials.

Apart from these major theories, numerous supporting theories have been employed in the explanation of certain mechanisms. Activation Theory, for instance, has formed the basis of a mediated moderation model of the explanation of how personality traits, like agreeableness, are transformed into volunteering work (Chen & Su, 2025). Social Origin Theory and Signal Theory have equally been employed in cross-cultural research as useful theories for analysis in the explanation of the structural differences in the motivation for volunteering in various forms of political and cultural settings (Hustinx et al., 2010). Social Cognition Theory, on the other hand, is often employed at the interactional level in the explanation of the diffusion processes, including the role of social self-efficacy in the mediation of peer-driven volunteering (Xin et al., 2026).

As far as the methodologies employed in volunteering research are concerned, the focus has moved from the commonly used variable-centered regression analysis. For example, Interpretative Structural Modeling (ISM) has been employed in the analysis of fifteen factors affecting volunteering and the creation of a hierarchical structure of seven levels that differentiate the factors from the direct surface level, the indirect level, and the foundational level (He et al., 2023). The importance of the model is most obvious when the aim of the research is not only predictive in nature but also seeks to explain the internal logic of the structural relationships in the explanation of the determinants of volunteering.

Finally, a smaller stream of research draws on philosophical and motivational theories. The Marxist theory of "human nature" and Maslow's hierarchy of needs have been used to analyze the unity of altruistic and self-interested motives in a dialectical manner (Zhang & Feng, 2022). The argument here is straightforward: volunteering rarely rests on pure self-sacrifice, yet it cannot be reduced to instrumental self-interest either. Related discussions often converge on an "altruism" perspective, which conceptualizes altruistic behavior as voluntary, other-oriented action. Such behavior may also satisfy social interaction needs, strengthen empathy and interpersonal trust, reduce stress, and ultimately support psychological well-being (Geng et al., 2022).

Two issues, however, deserve explicit attention. First, existing studies tend to apply these theories in a parallel and additive way, rather than integrating them into a coherent explanatory architecture. TPB, social capital, institutional trust, and meaning-making frameworks often appear side by side, but the relationships among them—whether they are complementary, competing, or nested—are rarely theorized.

Second, theoretical localization remains uneven. While micro-level decision models are relatively well adapted (e.g., cognition-enhanced TPB), macro-level frameworks are often imported with limited sensitivity to China's state-led mobilization structure and the institutionalized nature of campus volunteering. This matters because the same volunteering behavior may carry different psychological meanings and governance functions across contexts.

Taken together, the literature suggests a straightforward expectation: a more convincing account of Chinese college students' volunteering requires multi-level theorizing, in which individual intention formation, organizational embedding, and institutional logics are treated as interconnected rather than isolated explanatory layers.

Main Research Methods

Research into Chinese university student volunteering has also shown that while quantitative research has traditionally dominated the field, qualitative and mixed-method approaches have gradually become more prominent. The overall trend is clear: while quantitative research is still the primary methodology used in this field, there is an increasing recognition of the significance and importance of lived experiences and the processes of meaning-making and context.

Quantitative research is the primary methodology used in this field, with questionnaire surveys being the most commonly used research tool. The sample sizes used vary from approximately 200 to as many as 12,722 students from different and varied backgrounds and locations, and from different academic disciplines, year levels, types of hukou, and nationalities (Cai & Zhou, 2025; Hu et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2024; Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). While there is an expansion in the sampling scope used in quantitative research into this field, there is also an increasing sophistication in the analysis used. The quantitative research conducted in this field in recent years has used an extremely broad range of different statistical analysis tools and techniques, such as difference-in-differences models, ANOVA, hierarchical regression models, structural equation models, Bootstrap mediation tests, multilevel models, longitudinal random actor-oriented models, propensity score matching, and even double machine learning. These are used to analyze various aspects such as correlation, causality, mediation effects, and moderation effects (Cai & Zhou, 2025; Chen et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Xin et al., 2026). The quantitative methodology used in this field has clearly progressed beyond the "basic survey and regression" pattern and is now more capable of supporting more robust claims about causality and mechanisms.

Qualitative research is also used in this field but is generally conducted on a smaller scale and is more focused on deeper and more in-depth research objectives. Most qualitative research uses in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnography to explore motivational meanings, lived experiences, and cultural differences embedded in volunteering activities (Liu et al., 2017; Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022; Wang, 2022).

Research designs with mixed methods represent a smaller but increasingly expanding body of literature. Some studies combine survey research with field experiments or qualitative interviews, mostly with the aim of enhancing validity and providing more detailed and rich interpretive explanations of findings obtained from quantitative analyses (Xu & Zhang, 2023; Shi et al., 2021). The increasing use of mixed research designs suggests an increasing awareness and sophistication in methodology. While statistical associations are undoubtedly valuable, they often require additional interpretive findings to produce more compelling and robust explanations.

Other significant research methodologies are also present but are used less frequently. Comparative studies across different cultures and societies have compared Chinese student

volunteering with other countries such as Canada and the USA, emphasizing the impact of social and political structures on student volunteering (Hustinx et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2017). Longitudinal research designs involve multi-wave tracking data and explore dynamic relationships and long-term trends in student volunteering (Chen & Su, 2025; Xin et al., 2026). Bibliometric studies have used visualization technology such as CiteSpace to analyze the core journal publications from 2002 to 2022 and have identified the research hotspots and evolution trends in the field (Fan, 2023).

Despite the increasing sophistication and diversity in research methodology, there is still an imbalance in the literature. While there is no shortage of cross-sectional survey research and increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses, there is a relative scarcity in research designs that are better suited to explaining processes and dynamics in institutions and the long-term impact of student volunteering on civic dispositions. While there is no doubt that the literature is becoming more sophisticated in explaining what predicts student volunteering, there is still limited understanding of how student volunteering influences students over time in different contexts.

Research Controversies and Limitations

Research Controversies

The Diversity of Motivations and the Risk of Alienation. A consensus among researchers has identified the essential characteristic: volunteering among Chinese college students is rarely driven by a singular cause. Altruistic considerations, social needs, and career-related factors tend to coexist within individuals, and sometimes even within the same volunteering practice. As such, the concept of motivation is best represented as an amalgam rather than a set of discrete categories.

Cotation emerges when instrumental factors are introduced into the debate. Some studies take a more critical approach, arguing that an overemphasis on career development or incentive-based factors might undermine the civic value of volunteering and its public character (Pevnaya et al., 2022). The problem is certainly worthy of serious consideration. If volunteering becomes an activity focused on the accumulation of certificates, credits, or other forms of resume-enhancing benefits, it might change from being a civic practice to an instrumental one.

A different line of argument contests the idea that altruistic and instrumental factors are mutually exclusive. Instead, these two factors can coexist without undermining each other, and an effective system of incentives might actually help stabilize participation over time by keeping the balance between the two (Wang & Ge, 2025). The real problem, therefore, is not whether incentives exist, but what form these incentives take and what type of participation is encouraged and rewarded.

The pandemic period also serves to shed further light on the dynamic nature of volunteer motivation. Research findings have shown that not only do public-interest concerns and private-gain preferences compete, but they also interact and change, and their effects depend on both the type of service and the temporal context. Undergraduate students with high public-interest concerns and low private-gain preferences have the highest overall participation rates (Geng et al., 2022). The findings suggest an important boundary condition:

the same set of motivational factors may produce different behavioral outcomes depending on whether volunteering takes the form of emergency response, routine service to the community, or institutional activity assignment.

From a theoretical viewpoint, Marxist humanism supplies a dialectic for interpreting the motivational complexities. According to this viewpoint, altruism and self-interest are opposing but related forces. Reasonable self-interest supplies the behavioral foundation for volunteering, while altruism constitutes a higher-order moral aspiration. More important, this viewpoint highlights the need to avoid negating self-interest. If this occurs, volunteering may be perceived as a form of moral coercion rather than a voluntary civic behavior (Zhang & Feng, 2022).

However, the diversity of volunteer motivation does not occur in a social vacuum. Within the Chinese context, motivations are constantly being shaped—and even reconfigured—by the institutional settings within which volunteer activities are organized.

The Dual Effects of National Mobilization. National mobilisation is another unique institutional factor in the volunteering practice of Chinese college students. On the one hand, national mobilisation can help the expansion of volunteering practice while creating certain tensions at the same time.

Firstly, from the enabling perspective, national mobilisation can provide the legitimacy of policies, organisational supports, and material bases for volunteering practice. Universities and CYL organisations can mobilise their members efficiently in terms of the organisational supports they provide. In this respect, national mobilisation can not only encourage volunteering practice among college students but can also create opportunities for volunteering practice. In this respect, the role of national mobilisation is not only enabling but can also be seen as creating opportunities for volunteering practice itself.

However, from the tension perspective, national mobilisation can create tensions in the sustainability of volunteering practice when the mobilisation of volunteering practice is too administrative in focus. In this respect, volunteering practice may become formalistic when students are required by the university or CYL organisations to participate in volunteering practice. In this respect, volunteering practice may not be sustainable in the long run, and students may develop resistance towards volunteering practice as a whole (Teets et al., 2022).

This duality becomes even clearer in the context of comparative research. Citizen-driven practices that center on individualistic needs and voluntary, self-driven engagement have a greater potential for the development of democratic learning effects compared to programs that mainly rely on the mobilization of the state (Teets et al., 2022). In the case of China, college students have occasionally expressed dissatisfaction with the "formalized" character of nationally driven programs and have demonstrated a greater inclination towards engaging in voluntary practices that have personal significance (Zhang & Lin, 2008). This shows that the issue of mobilization is not inherently the problem but depends on the ability of the students to retain a level of agency within the existing structures.

From this understanding, the issue of national mobilization can be recognized as a conditional factor that is most effective when it exists as an enabling institutional

infrastructure and becomes counterproductive when it takes the form of administrative pressure. The line between the two is the degree to which the practice of volunteering remains a form of civic practice and becomes reduced to institutional compliance.

National mobilization provides partial understanding of the issue of participation at the institutional level but fails to provide a complete understanding of the process through which the internal perceptions of the students are translated into action.

The Pathway of Cognitive Influence on Behavior. There is not an absolute consensus in the scientific literature regarding the mechanism by which cognitive factors lead to volunteering behavior. The main debate is about the mediating mechanism. Specifically, it is not clear if the cognitive influence is completely mediated by the mentioned mediating variables or if there is an option for the direct route as well.

Firstly, there is the line of reasoning that supports the idea of a completely mediated cognitive influence. From this perspective, it is argued that cognitive influences on volunteering behavior occur indirectly, through the mediating variables of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Empirically, the indirect cognitive-behavioral relationship has been found to be robust, especially in studies that adopted the Theory of Planned Behavior (Hu et al., 2023; He et al., 2023). From this perspective, cognitive influences on volunteering behavior matter because they affect how students perceive volunteering behavior.

A second line of reasoning supports the idea of partial mediation. From this perspective, it is argued that in certain situational contexts, cognition bypasses the mediating variables and influences behavior directly. Empirically, it has been found that in contexts in which institutional trust is high, the direct cognitive-behavioral relationship is more likely to occur. This is an important finding because it suggests that cognitive orientations do not necessarily need to pass the 'psychological filter' in order to lead to behavior.

The real issue at stake, therefore, is no longer the simple presence of mediation, but the circumstances under which the direct route becomes feasible. To express the same problem differently: What are the boundary conditions that allow cognition to be directly translated into action? What are the contextual factors such as institutionalised trust, the strength of mobilisation, organisationalisation, or the nature of service work that facilitate or control the conversion of cognitive orientations into actual participation?

At the present state of the art, empirical research offers only scarce information on these issues. The ways in which contextual factors trigger or restrict the cognition-to-behaviour route are still insufficiently explored. This is an exciting field for further research that offers considerable potential for the advancement of theory on volunteering behaviour.

Insufficient Research

Incomplete Coverage of Research Dimensions. Nevertheless, the current research on volunteering among Chinese college students still reveals gaps in the examination of group heterogeneity. The problem of sampling bias remains the central issue. There are numerous studies that focus mainly on elite universities located in economically developed regions (Chen

et al., 2023; He et al., 2025). For instance, the number of students from the southwestern region makes up 35.7% of the total number of surveyed individuals, while the eastern region is overrepresented, and the northeastern region comprises only 3.0% of the total number of surveyed individuals (Hu et al., 2023; Cai & Zhou, 2025).

Marginalised groups are another category that has received insufficient research attention. Science and engineering students, humanities and social sciences students, graduate and undergraduate students, ethnic minority students, rural college students, and international students are some of the subgroups that have received insufficient research attention. Systematic comparisons of their motivations for volunteering, their behaviour, and the underlying mechanisms are rare (Cai & Zhou, 2025; Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). Although the study conducted by Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah (2022) attempted to fill the gap in the examination of the volunteering behaviour of international graduate students, the small number of surveyed individuals (N = 15) significantly limits the generalisation potential of the study. Lv et al. (2024) attempted to expand the scope of the study through the provincial-level survey; however, students from vocational institutions and rural universities are still excluded from the study.

Conducting longitudinal research within this domain is still limited. This is due to the fact that only a small number of researchers have been able to conduct long-term studies on volunteers. This situation hinders the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the long-term development consequences of volunteering as well as the bidirectional relationship that could exist between volunteering and well-being (Alganami & El Keshky, 2025; Geng et al., 2022). While a small number of researchers within the field have adopted the multi-wave methodology for research, this is still not the norm. In fact, the evolution of volunteering behavior over time, such as the evolution of motivation, skill acquisition, or persistence, cannot be fully documented (Xin et al., 2026). It is apparent that the field is still limited in terms of acquiring a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences of volunteering due to the fact that the majority of the existing research is still limited to the cross-sectional methodology.

It is also apparent that the field is covered in a selective manner. For instance, negative phenomena such as the existence of formalized participation, volunteer burnout, and the disillusionment of motivations for volunteering have received little attention from scholars within the field. The causes for these negative phenomena, as well as the possible intervention strategies that could be adopted to deal with these issues, have also not been sufficiently addressed. In addition, it is apparent that the field is covered in a selective manner since the comparison of the differentiated effects that exist in various types of volunteering, such as the implementation of programs for teaching in the countryside, environmental protection programs, and community service programs, is still limited (Cai & Zhou, 2025). This indicates that the existing research within the field favors the positive and easily quantifiable results.

These gaps that exist within the field indicate that the existing research within the field is still limited in a number of ways. This situation could lead to the fact that the existing theories within the field could be overly optimistic in terms of their generalizability.

Insufficient Innovation in Theory and Methodology. In the case of Chinese university student volunteering, existing research suggests that there is an underlying theoretical assumption

rooted in Western paradigms. For instance, there are many mainstream studies that have applied theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Capital Theory. While these theories are undoubtedly useful theories from which to analyze volunteering behavior, their direct application often fails to account for Chinese contexts. Existing theories have not sufficiently developed concepts such as the significance of hardship experiences, the impact of Confucian benevolence, the role of interpersonal social networks, and the embeddedness of volunteering behavior in Chinese contexts. While there have been some cross-cultural studies that have compared Chinese and Western contexts, such studies have often focused more on macro-level cultural differences between China and Western nations. However, there is little emphasis on intra-national cultural differences in China, with volunteering behavior varying across different regions and ethnic groups in China itself. As such, there is an underlying sense that theoretical development is imported and that there is limited adaptation and innovation from Chinese realities.

From the methodological perspective, the field continues to be dominated by questionnaire survey approaches. Although such approaches provide breadth, they provide only part of the picture. Ethnographic approaches, longitudinal studies, and experimental designs, which are particularly well-suited for the study of process dynamics, causal mechanisms, and change over time, are less common. As such, the literature faces problems in developing strong causal explanations for the determinants and effects of volunteering.

Similarly, the measurement approaches require further refinement. The majority of the studies treat volunteering as an indicator of participation or non-participation, without adequately considering other factors such as the frequency of participation, the duration of participation, and the level of commitment. The lack of such consideration makes the study of the effects of volunteering difficult, particularly in terms of understanding the effects of different levels of participation (Cai & Zhou, 2025; He et al., 2023). To give an example, the study might treat the volunteering of a student once a semester the same way as the volunteering of another student once a week, despite the probable effects of such volunteering on the development of skills, civic engagement, and personal growth.

These limitations of theory and methodology highlight the need for more locally based theories and methodologies in the future. Without these improvements, the theories and the policies based upon the existing body of research may be incomplete and potentially misleading in the future.

Insufficient Practice-Oriented Research. Research into the differentiated effects of intervention strategies has not yet gained much ground. Specifically, there is a lack of program design research targeting certain groups of students, for example, students with low levels of civic cognition, students with high levels of instrumental motivation, ethnic minority students, college students in rural areas, and international students (Cai & Zhou, 2025; Kifle Mekonen & Adarkwah, 2022). In practice, this often leads to the dominance of “one-size-fits-all” volunteering programs that cannot meet the differentiated demands and motivation of different groups of students. Without the design of practice-oriented and empirically based interventions, these programs may not only be inefficient in practice but may even produce negative effects.

Research into the digital revolution of volunteering is also relatively underdeveloped. On the one hand, the variety of online volunteering has grown rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, research into the characteristics, effects, and optimization of these forms of volunteering is still in the early stages. For example, the role of social media in influencing volunteering has not yet been well understood, particularly with respect to the processes of peer contagion, self-efficacy development, and long-term engagement (Xin et al., 2026).

However, research into multi-actor collaboration is still in its early stages. The coordination logic of universities, government agencies, and social organizations has yet to be fully revealed. Specifically, there is a lack of solid empirical support for a comprehensive collaborative model, including cognitive guidance, project provision, organizational support, and institutional protection (Liu et al., 2025). At the same time, the integration of volunteer services into labour education, moral education, and professional education is still at a shallow level (Chen et al., 2023; Lv et al., 2024; He et al., 2023). Meanwhile, research into incentive mechanisms is mostly conducted at the macro level, without paying enough attention to individual preferences in decision-making among diverse student groups (Zhang & Feng, 2022; Wang & Ge, 2025).

All these aspects show that practice-oriented research is still in its early stages, both in terms of methodology and conceptual thinking. Without systematic and empirical guidance, it is difficult to tap into the potential of volunteer services in fostering citizenship skills, moral development, and social integration among college students.

Conclusions and Prospects

Research on Chinese university student volunteering has evolved over time and has gradually formed a relatively systematic body of knowledge. Past studies have focused on the fundamental aspects of university student volunteering, including the patterns and factors of volunteering, and the effects of volunteering in all aspects. They have identified the mechanisms of the influencing factors of volunteering, including cognition, attitude, subjective norms, institutional trust, personality traits, and cultural values, etc., and have obtained a more profound understanding of the influencing factors of volunteering. The Theory of Planned Behavior and the Social Capital Theory, which are commonly used in the West, have also been tested in the Chinese context. At the same time, the importance of the influencing role of Chinese unique factors, including national mobilization mechanisms, cultural traditions, and institutional linkage structures, has gradually gained attention from researchers. The research has gradually moved from the perspective of macro-governance, from the perspective of micro-individual behavior, from the perspective of single-actor behavior, and from the perspective of single-methodology research. However, from the perspective of the evolution of the research itself, the limitations of the research can be summarized as follows: the scope of the research is limited; the universality of the research is limited; the localization of the theories is limited; the innovation of the methodology is limited; and the application of the research is limited. All of these limitations indicate that although the past research has formed a general picture of the subject, the in-depth explanation of the subject is still limited.

With respect to aspects of future research, the limitations identified in this paper should be addressed in three aspects. One is to extend the scope of research. More emphasis should

be given to under-explored groups, including rural college students, postgraduate students, science and engineering students, ethnic minorities, and international students. Besides, it is suggested that longitudinal studies be conducted to reveal the long-term effects of volunteering. It is also suggested that future studies extend the dimensions of behavior, differentiating differences in participation times, frequencies, and intensities. Without differentiating these aspects, differences in participation might be missed.

Another is to extend the innovation of theories and methods. There is a need to improve localized theories by introducing specific Chinese institutional and cultural elements, including the logic of institutional connections, cultural elements of hardship experiences, and collaborative education. Besides, it is suggested that mixed methods, longitudinal studies, and cross-regional comparative studies be adopted. The innovative methods might help transcend descriptive studies.

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