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Remaking the value of work

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Remaking the value of work:

The emergence of grassroots philanthropy in China

ABSTRACT

In recent decades China has seen a rise in grassroots "philanthropy" (*gongyi*), or charity and volunteerism that is not directed by the state. Much of the discussion on this phenomenon suggests that it is a response to a perceived "moral crisis." But the emergence of grassroots philanthropy is also—and perhaps more centrally—a response to people's changing valuation of work in a time of economic restructuring, especially among people who find their labor at risk of becoming surplus. This development profoundly challenges their sense of self-worth. As a result, many ordinary people—primarily men with a relatively low social standing—are engaging in philanthropy as a form of "work," even though this work is frequently in tension with their familial obligations. In doing so, they cocreate alternative social arenas in which the value of their work may be realized. Nonetheless, the question whether doing philanthropy is proper work remains open, ambiguous, and subject to continual negotiation. [*grassroots philanthropy, volunteerism, work, value, ethics, China*]

It was 4 p.m. and Chen Yuming, a thin man in his 30s, had already spent several hours working alone, sorting donated secondhand clothing in a charity store called Garment Love.[1] Yuming had managed this store for over two years. It gave away donated clothing for free to local migrant workers and delivered the rest to Shanxi, Yunnan, and Tibet—"to the poor in remote mountain areas," as Yuming put it. Garment Love was the first charity store in Haicheng County, located in the greater Wenzhou municipality on China's southeast coast. The store was fully operated by volunteers, as were most philanthropic organizations in town. At the same time, Yuming was busy with many other philanthropic projects, including a countywide volunteer search-and-rescue team that he founded and managed. Every day he donated one yuan (US$0.15) to another charity group, and he participated in two other organizations that made household visits to poor children and elders, offering aid and social support where needed.

Although Yuming did not receive money for work of this kind, he did not call himself a "volunteer" (*zhiyuanzhe* or *yigong*). He used a fancier title, "grassroots philanthropist" (*caogen gongyi ren*), which is what many other managers, founders, and supporters of philanthropic organizations in China call themselves. In addition to this very "proper-sounding" yet unpaid work, Yuming took on many other roles. Since age 16, his main source of income had been working as a professional Daoist ritual specialist, sometimes assembling his own team of ritual specialists and working on others' commissions. As a member of the county's Daoism Association, he had established a nationwide Daoist orchestra and had organized many events promoting local Daoist culture. He had tried out various forms of wage labor for short periods of time, and for a year he had been involved in the trade of illicit tobacco from the Sino-Burma border, in southwest China. When his wife worked at a local household factory, he sometimes helped out with her piecework at home.

Yuming was also the father of a six-year-old daughter, and his wife was pregnant with their second child.

Considering these multiple and shifting roles, the following typical sociological categories seem insufficient to characterize Yuming: volunteer, ritual specialist, businessperson, petty capitalist, wage worker. He and his fellow grassroots philanthropists often invoke the vernacular term *ordinary person* (*putong laobaixing*) to distinguish themselves from members of the government and the elite. The term *grassroots* (*caogen*) denotes their relatively lower socioeconomic standing, as opposed to the conventional portrayal of bourgeois philanthropy and philanthropists, who are associated with making big donations.[2]

Yuming is one of many ordinary people who are caught up in "philanthropy fever" (*gongyi re*), which has proliferated in China's towns and cities in the past decade. Diverse forms of charity and volunteerism are being organized by ordinary citizens, and some are increasingly supported—and monitored—by the state. The term *gongyi cishan* (philanthropy) has reentered the public sphere and infiltrated the daily lives of many ordinary people in towns through TV, online forums, and social media platforms, particularly QQ and WeChat.[3] In this article, I have chosen the English term *philanthropy* to gloss the various concepts and practices seen in the Chinese context that are mainly expressed by the local terms *gongyi* (common good), *cishan* ("compassion" or "charity"), and *zuohaoshi* (doing good deeds).[4] Although these words have different meanings and connotations for different people, most ordinary citizens use them interchangeably, and they constitute a wide range of social acts of doing good for others beyond one's immediate family, including charitable giving, volunteering, and contributing to civic improvement projects for the collective good, such as building hospitals, schools, and roads, and providing environmental protection.[5]

New to this wave of contemporary Chinese philanthropy is that its local leaders are not elites, religious leaders, or state agents—as would be true in historical or other social contexts—but rather "ordinary people," that is, people who have limited wealth and power.[6] Despite their relatively precarious financial standing, people like Yuming aspire to work for the collective good, beyond their own family. They have committed themselves to establishing social organizations by mobilizing and managing resources for projects with social objectives, primarily for children, elderly and disabled people, and other marginalized groups who are perceived as in a "state of plight" (*kunjing*). While most of these "grassroots philanthropists" donate a small sum of money from time to time, they emphasize not how much they can donate but how many volunteers and donors they can mobilize to participate in projects for the collective good, promoting philanthropy as a "lifestyle" for people from all socioeconomic strata. I heard repeatedly from these grassroots philanthropists that "they have money [*qian*], and we have time [*xian*]. We should collaborate together and get more people to participate in doing philanthropy!" What motivates people of this kind to do "philanthropy," to help strangers despite their own increasing anxiety about fulfilling family duties, with varying levels of persistence? This article analyzes the emergence of this grassroots philanthropy in contemporary China.[7] The analysis draws on my 18 months of fieldwork in Haicheng County from 2015 to 2017, which was supplemented by annual visits in 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Why has China seen a rise in philanthropy (including charity and volunteerism)? One popular argument is that people are doing more charity and volunteerism today as a response to China's perceived "moral crisis" or "moral decline":[8] the growth of apathy toward strangers, illicit businesses that produce fake or toxic food products, and distrust among strangers. Adding to this is the perceived proliferation of "uncivil" individualism (Yan 2009, 289) since the 1980s post-Mao marketization reforms (see also Yan 2021). It is reasoned that because people fear living with risk and lack a moral compass, new forms of political and moral action have arisen that foster changes in state-society relations. Meanwhile, scholars have taken the growing volunteerism and charity as evidence of a new kind of ethics in response to the perceived moral crisis (Fleischer 2011; Ning and Palmer 2020; Yan 2011).[9] For instance, Weller et al. (2017, 2) provide rich ethnographic data that link the rise of religious charity in contemporary Chinese societies to a new form of "self" that is anchored to "transnational and cosmopolitan notions of universal goodness." They insightfully point out that in this contemporary wave of religious charity, the notion of goodness and the practices it comprises are new to China. They term the new contemporary form "industrialized philanthropy," which is large scale, increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized, and "dis-embedded from local social life and personal social connections" (Weller et al. 2017, 2), exhibiting a "philanthropic turn of religions" (K. Wu 2017).

Building on this analysis, my research similarly suggests that seemingly novel kinds of ethics and social organizations are a product of the political and economic moment. But my research departs from Weller et al.'s (2017) emphasis on delocalized "goodness," suggesting a complex entanglement of moral and extramoral motivations (economic, political, existential) that are intimately embedded in local social and economic life. As Malkki's (2015) ethnography of Finnish humanitarian aid reminds us, even explicitly "cosmopolitan" and "universal" values and practices such as humanitarianism and humanitarian aid are buttressed by diverse motives particular to local sociality and politics. Moreover, many analysts assume that, because China's economy continues to grow, its middle class has more money to donate and time to spend on volunteerism. This is perhaps mainly because most of the ethnographic

fieldwork cited above was done before 2012, when President Xi Jinping came to power; since then China's economy and politics have shifted substantially. In the post-2012 political economy, the assumed link between economic growth and the rise of grassroots philanthropy has become particularly tenuous. In the early 2010s, varying degrees of economic slowdown accompanied a series of restructuring efforts in the private economy. What came as a surprise to me when I conducted my long-term fieldwork, from 2015 to 2017, was that an even greater number of projects were enthusiastically organized by ordinary people whose livelihoods were greatly affected by the economic downturns. These more recent developments prompt a rethinking of the relations between ethics and the changing political economy.

Here, the anthropological discussion on the rise of philanthropy in other political-economic contexts offers some insights. Much of this discussion has contextualized the rise of vernacular charity and volunteerism in relation to postwelfare neoliberal conditions. In brief, the decline in the state provision of welfare and employment has led people to espouse community-based private volunteerism as a critical means of delivering social services and contributing to the shaping of "ethical citizenship" (Caldwell 2016; Muehlebach 2012; Rose 1996; Rozakou 2016). Particularly relevant here is Muehlebach's (2012) seminal work on the rise of volunteerism in post-Fordist Italy. Once stable Fordist work was no longer available, Muehlebach finds, marginalized Italian citizens found a sense of belonging and participation through volunteer work. In this context, volunteer work, as unpaid care work, has become the locus of psychological and emotional investment through which people achieve self-realization. The institutionalization of the private moral obligations of care through volunteer work also compensates for the Italian state's retreat from welfare provision.

Today's grassroots philanthropy in China is similarly connected to complex political and economic processes that cannot be reduced to, but that are interwoven with, people's changing ethical lives. Its emergence responds not only to the changing moral landscape but also—and perhaps more centrally—to a historically saturated and shifting valuation of work in a time of economic stagnation and restructuring. Instead of wealth or power, what "ordinary people" have is time—time that they can spare from their normal work or that they have *available*, mainly owing to economic restructuring. This time becomes a resource in restructuring their lives to find a career (*shiye*) that they view as decent and worthy. Whereas in the neoliberal context, moral citizens' philanthropic responses are driven by a growing demand or crisis for welfare provision, China's grassroots philanthropy could be characterized as supply driven, in the sense that ordinary people are often driven to help by surplus energies. Indeed, some of their institutional experiments are increasingly becoming part of the state's expansion of welfare infrastructure.

Although volunteers usually perform unpaid labor, they still conceptualize their activities in terms of work (*gongzuo*) that produces value. To distinguish between the meanings of work and labor, I draw on Wallman's (1979, 4–6) definition of work in the broadest sense as energy expenditures that have certain purposes and that provide meaning. Moreover, I use *labor* in the sense of a neutral expenditure of energy (Firth 1979, 179). As anthropologists have suggested, work produces both value (e.g., of a commodity) and values (e.g., of justice, family values) in multiple forms, and the division between value and values is rather symbolic (Graeber 2013). For instance, Harris (2007, 149) shows how Bolivian farmers positively value their energy expenditure, not only as an economic means but also as "expressions of value." In Graeber's (2013, 225) framing, value is "the way the importance of our work" becomes "real to us by being realized in some socially recognized form." Similarly, the impulse of grassroots philanthropists to help others is entangled with their need to be recognized for their work and with their concern about the worthiness of how they are spending their time. As Graeber (2013, 225) insightfully points out, human imaginations play a role in cocreating such "social arenas," or what Bourdieu termed social "fields," in which certain forms of value can be realized. Drawing on Graeber's ethnographic approach to value, this article approaches "doing philanthropy" (as a direct translation of *zuo gongyi*) as a form of work that produces additional value, in the form of self-worth, dignity, and masculinity (for men) when these are challenged amid political-economic restructuring.

My inquiries into people's creative remaking of the value of work corresponds to anthropologists' recent attempts to recenter the study of the economy through thick descriptions of how "ordinary people" make a living when they navigate different regimes of value in coping with a crisis and cast their hope into the future (Narotzky and Besnier 2014; Narotzky and Goddard 2017). Yuming and others aspire not only to have a livelihood in the material sense but more broadly to have meaningful work and a career that is "worth" the effort. This finding leads me to focus on the connections between the practices and notions in China's broader economic processes, particularly the latest restructurings and the slowdown since the 2010s.

Doing philanthropy as work and as career

I selected Haicheng County, Wenzhou, as my main field site because it has had a relatively early and rapid development of grassroots philanthropic projects and associations compared to other regions of China over the past two decades. Participant observation and unstructured interviews are my main methods. Instead of conducting organization-based

research, I followed my interlocutors not only as they engaged with philanthropic projects and organizations but also when they performed other social, economic, and familial activities, which allowed me to contextualize their public and social engagement in their broader project of making a living.

Since the turn of the 21st century, several grassroots philanthropists in Wenzhou have experimented and created operational models that have contributed to the rapid growth of local grassroots philanthropic projects and organizations (Fengjiang 2019). Since 2013, many of Haicheng's unregistered volunteer and charitable organizations have officially registered themselves with few restrictions. The entry-level requirements for setting up an organization are low enough that ordinary people with relatively limited social and economic resources may do so. The number of organizations registered as "philanthropic-type" "social organizations" in Haicheng increased rapidly from three before 2013 to 50 in 2015.

Most organizations in Haicheng carry out a wide range of projects according to their sources of funding. In fact, only a few organizations across Wenzhou specialize in just one kind of service, such as wildlife protection, juvenile delinquency prevention and legal aid, support for women experiencing divorce or violence, or support for autistic children and adults. Aside from these specialized organizations, most organizations engage in two forms of philanthropy. The first is household visits, which are used to perform care work for selected beneficiaries, usually poor children and older people in local rural villages. Household visits involve assessing potential beneficiaries and then trying to meet their needs, such as by helping renovate their home, offering financial aid and social support for children's education or older people's elderly care, or helping them to apply for welfare benefits. This form of philanthropy focuses on the long-term regular provision of care, sometimes in collaboration with the local Ministry of Civil Affairs as part of the state's expanding welfare and targeted poverty-alleviation programs (undertaken in 2013–20). The second form of philanthropy, in which men predominate as volunteers, is search-and-rescue volunteerism (*jiuyuan*), which usually takes the form of searching for missing people in mountains, lakes, and the ocean, as well as offering relief during natural disasters, mainly typhoons, flooding, and mudslides, which occur only in particular seasons (Fengjiang, forthcoming). This kind of immediate help is spontaneous and energy consuming, and it involves risk-taking. Some volunteers were on call at an office in town, usually around the clock, as they chatted with fellow volunteers and waited to receive incident-related phone calls. In the case of natural disasters, these volunteers' main task was finding and rescuing a missing stranger (living or dead). Like Yuming, mentioned at the beginning of this article, search-and-rescue volunteers also organize and participate

in home visits. Their familiarity with the local socioeconomic life and geographies is an asset to both forms of philanthropy.

Both activities share an affinity with the aid world's distinction between "development" and "humanitarianism," as noted in much anthropological literature (e.g., Benthall 2017). Yet they are buttressed by different notions of worthy beneficiaries, organizational forms, gender dynamics, and temporal rhythms. In this article, I focus on the two things they have in common: manual labor and long-term commitment. Both are performed as paid work by local government officials and employees as part of their duties, as well as by private professionals at market rate. In Europe this kind of social work is usually performed by public employees or government-funded volunteers. The Chinese state, however, is still developing a legal and administrative infrastructure in response to a growing voluntary sector populated by grassroots philanthropists who are seeking to institutionalize their work as an officially recognized profession. In this situation, their unpaid work produces additional moral values under the name of "philanthropy" instead of "work."[10]

Unlike the unemployed young people, middle-class housewives, and retirees who compose most volunteer groups in the Global North (e.g., Muehlebach 2012; Nakano 2004; Trundle 2014), Haicheng's volunteers and grassroots philanthropists also work to make a living. Among the long-term grassroots philanthropists who established and had managed organizations for years and even decades, most were men working in the private sector, floating between wage work and entrepreneurship. They had young children and a high divorce rate. The majority were middle aged (mid-30s to late 40s), so they were expected by locals to have a family and to be in the prime years of their career. Before they took up their new roles as grassroots philanthropists, many had been caught up in a marginal position in society and were changing how they made a living. They usually start as volunteers in projects organized by others. After some seminal experiences as volunteers, they commit themselves to supporting their own teams, organizations, and projects either as half- or full-time managers. They mobilize, coordinate, and deliver human, financial, legal, and administrative resources by making social connections for their local beneficiaries within a county that consists of towns and rural villages.

Many of them strive to turn "doing philanthropy" into a "career" (*shiye*) instead of a spontaneous activity they do in their spare time (cf. Prince and Brown 2016).[11] An often-invoked metaphor is that volunteers are like "floating soldiers," coming and going, whereas grassroots philanthropists "persist and sustain" their "iron-forged camp." The word *persistence* emphasizes their entrepreneurial aspiration to make a career out of philanthropy, which is more rationalized and institutionalized than ad hoc volunteerism

and individual charitable acts, and which is explicitly targeted at long-term social, economic, and environmental change. The word *persistence* also captures one of the most salient challenges that these grassroots philanthropists face when juggling their philanthropic work and their family duties. Our conversations were typically about work, and they often touched on the questions Yuming was preoccupied with: "Can doing philanthropy be proper work and a career path [*shiye*] worth pursuing? What is better work to do?" It became clear to me that the many conversations we had about work were simultaneously about *making a living* and about having a good career (*shiye*) that is *worth the effort*.

In the vernacular context the term *shiye* does not necessarily connote progressing in a bureaucratic hierarchy. It places dual emphasis on individual choice and on social content (meaning social reproduction, or contributing to societal well-being). In this sense, *shiye* is about work that not only provides a livelihood for one's family but also creates and reproduces social values for an imagined community beyond one's family. As my interlocutors put it, this kind of *shiye* is about "contributing to society." Building a *shiye* is processual and involves moral, familial, and social responsibilities. It is more than a job; it provides meaning, narrative, identity, and purpose. Owing to this dual focus on both the individual and the social, the term *shiye* has an affinity with the English terms *career* and *vocation*, yet it is not identical to them. As Sennett (1998, 9) reminds us, the original meaning of *career* was "a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labor meant a lifelong channel for one's economic pursuits." Extending this meaning of *career*, we can say that *shiye* is a lifelong channel for one's economic and social pursuits in contemporary China, where the economic and the social are entangled. For analytical purposes, I use *career* as the direct translation of *shiye* in a broad sense, one that does not separate productive from reproductive work and is anchored in a vision of continuity and long-term commitment, as emphasized by my interlocutors. The vernacular notion of *shiye* is often premised on a gendered division between public (*gong*) and private (*si*) realms; the figure of the independent, "able-bodied man" (Ferguson 2015, 43), who is also "responsible" (Wong 2020), offers the foundational model for many to achieve a good *shiye*. Women's domestic work, in contrast, is often relegated to the private realm, which is not recognized as a proper *shiye*, since this is thought to be realized in the public realm. This gendered notion of *shiye* creates gendered anxieties and has implications that both induce men's "crisis of masculinity" in times of economic precarity and undermine women's leadership in the public domain of *shiye*. The managers of several women's organizations are themselves professionals who already have a well-recognized *shiye*, whereas most male grassroots philanthropists have been seeking a *shiye*.

Nevertheless, the capacity of grassroots philanthropists to turn volunteerism into a career in philanthropy is restricted by their limited wealth and power. The value of their work dedicated to managing their philanthropic projects is subject to constant negotiation. Occasionally, their pursuit becomes, in their words, "difficult" and "exhausting." Their work is often contested by their families and social circles as unworthy. For instance, Yuming's livelihood as a Daoist ritual specialist had been greatly affected by the recent local economic downturn—he had many fewer commissions, much more free time, and hence less income than in his earlier prime years. With a second child due in a few months' time, he sought an alternative means of income in order to cope with his sense of financial insecurity and to prepare for the financial storm in his main occupation. Yet his parents, his wife, and his Daoist masters had all cautioned him that philanthropy could not be a "proper career" because it "does not make money." Hence, Yuming, along with many others, was caught in a liminal state between full commitment and complete withdrawal from philanthropic projects.

Whether "doing philanthropy" can be a proper career remains an open, ambiguous question rather than one of achieving a widely recognized embodiment of "goodness" (cf. Weller et al. 2017).[12] Thus, rather than focusing on how volunteers were motivated by and embodied certain notions of goodness, my ethnographic fieldwork leads me to attend to volunteers' desire to restructure their lives in search of a worthy form of work, one that would provide them social recognition in a time of economic restructuring. The next section explores the latest economic restructurings under which a growing number of people became available as volunteers. I then zoom in and show how volunteers strive for recognition by mimicking the formality of work as a government officer to remake the value of their work. I also discuss how such remakings are subject to constant negotiations.

Political-economic moment

Since the pioneering development of China's private economy in the 1980s, Wenzhou has suffered economic stagnation. Thus, what underlies the booming grassroots philanthropy in Haicheng County is *not* mainly its earlier spectacular economic growth but rather the recent economic crisis, including restructuring, failure, partial growth, upgrading, formalization, and looming stagnation, all of which are intimately connected to local, national, and global economic change. No single term can capture everyone's experiences of the local economy because winners and losers have different narratives. At first glance, ordinary people's anxiety about work may resemble the "precarity" discussed in social science literature (e.g., Millar 2017). But the political economy that produces

precarity and what precarity means to people in China are very different. Unlike the neoliberal turn in labor regimes that produces precarity in western Europe and North America (Standing 2011), temporary work or precarity has always been the norm in China's private sector (Swider 2015). As Xiang (2020, 523) points out, precarity takes the form of "flexible employment"—"precarious jobs that are enough to sustain a livelihood but not a secure future." In China this has a rather different register, one that alludes to entrepreneurship as pursued by people striving for upward mobility. And in contrast to the prevalent affect of "loss" in the post-Fordist societies undergoing an economic slowdown (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012), most ordinary people have a sense of "gain" and of political belonging through their participation in the country's rapid economic development (Xiang 2021).

Thus, amid the recent economic slowdown and stagnation in Wenzhou, there is a tension between vulnerability and resilience, and between a sense of marginality and one of empowered participation. In this "complexed development" (Xiang 2021, 243) some people working in the private sector become *available*. They are not available in the objective sense of becoming a "surplus population," as seen in rural Asia (cf. T. M. Li 2010), nor are they in the state of "waithood" that characterizes the underemployed or unemployed young people in North Africa and the Middle East (cf. Dhillon and Yousef 2009; Masquelier 2013). They are, rather, available in the more subjective sense of facing the threat of being left behind, no longer partaking in economic development and growth; this is accompanied by a sense of "unpredictability" in which entrepreneurial success and failure seem to be arbitrary (Steffen 2017). This is when many people begin to rethink their way of making a living and seek alternative careers that would allow them to continue participating in economic development for the long term as an alternative to the "presentism" adopted by other entrepreneurs (cf. Steffen 2017). The political economy of southeast coastal China—typified by the following case study of Haicheng County—is representative of a regional story dominated by private enterprises that are intimately connected with both the domestic and the global economy.[13]

The development of Haicheng County since the 1980s has been a story of the Wenzhou model, in which private sector actors have been a major driver in "reform-from-below," characterized as "privatization, marketization, and local deviation from state policies" (Liu 1992, 295). At the start of this period, each region usually specialized in the manufacturing and trading of one product. Surging demand allowed local enterprises connected to marketing to flourish. For instance, one of the region's main industries is the printing (*yinshua*) of signs, logos, advertisements, and brand names on a variety of materials such as plastics, woven bags, paper, and aluminum boards. Many enterprises cater to the global market, manufacturing badges for US police departments; for the British, Russian, Saudi Arabian, Argentine, Japanese, and Laos armed forces; and for UN peacekeeping forces (Sheng and Zheng 2004, 289). Moreover, these local private enterprises are mainly small and medium enterprises (SMEs) or household workshops located in private residences. Most of these operations are buttressed by a close-knit social network of private financing (Tsai 2002) and *guanxi* (social relationship), which merges formal and informal economic practices (Xiang 2005; Yang 1994; Zhang 2001).

Many volunteers and grassroots philanthropists work in these private enterprises while maintaining strong economic and social connections with Haicheng. Most were born in the 1970s and the 1980s, grew up in relatively poor rural villages, received five to 12 years of education, and moved to the main towns as adults. They can be broadly classified as peasants-turned–workers and entrepreneurs. Many have worked in other parts of China and recently returned to Haicheng County because of unfavorable business prospects or financial losses and debt. The divorce rate is relatively high among the volunteers, which is usually related to stories of business failure, debt, or gambling. Most are self-employed, or they work in family businesses, often having multiple sources of income that fluctuate over time. Some are temporary contract workers for government institutions; self-employed social media (*wechat*) journalists; taxi drivers; salespersons or traders; or entrepreneurs who run household enterprises, stores, outlets, restaurants, or cafés. To a varied extent, these types of work rely on local social relationships to build a good base of customers and suppliers by word of mouth. In addition, some of the male volunteers are recently retired soldiers seeking to become entrepreneurs. Some of the female volunteers are housewives, or they manage accommodations for migrant workers and traders in town on monthly contracts.

Precisely owing to its heavy reliance on the private economy and private financial networks, the local economy has been vulnerable to economic restructuring, particularly in the past two decades, in which the state undertook its recentralization measures. For instance, many volunteers and grassroots philanthropists worked in mining and printing—the two main industries in Haicheng that are undergoing drastic restructuring. In the printing industry, some of the common obstacles are the stricter regulations on labor conditions (rights and contracts), the stricter enforcement of taxation and environmental controls, and competition from other growing mass-production industries buttressed by cheap labor and raw materials. This is part of the larger national process of industrial upgrading that is moving away from cheap, "made in China" production toward environmentally friendly and "intelligent manufacturing," based on the strategic plan known as Made in China 2025 (Wübbeke et al. 2016). In the face of these

"formalization" processes, which have taken place since about 2000 (Xiang 2017), some business owners have been moving their manufacturing sites to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia, which have a looser regulatory environment and a cheaper labor pool. Those who have targeted the low-end made-in-China market have had to restructure their mode of marketing and production by upgrading their machinery and other technologies to target a niche market. Yet many others have had to struggle with their failure to upgrade, formalize, or change their business. Many of the search-and-rescue volunteers own and manage printing enterprises, and have encountered obstacles in upgrading their enterprises.

Meanwhile, since 2008 small-scale private mining in central and southwest China has become the target of state-led resource restructuring. In Shanxi Province all private coal mines were required to either merge with or be acquired by the state or state holding companies by 2015 (Shen, Gao, and Cheng 2012); this triggered widespread debate and anxiety over the private sector's future, as captured in the saying "the state enterprises advance, the private sector retreats" (*guojin mintui*). Many of my interlocutors who had worked or were still working in private mining as contractors, wage workers, mine owners, or shareholders in other parts of China were struggling because of the "demise of private mining." Some of them had returned to Haicheng to seek new work. Although the locations of private mining are far from Haicheng, the mining economy in central and southwest China has had a direct impact on people's lives in Haicheng through the county's close economic, social, and familial ties with the mining industry.

In this climate, investment capital has been diverted from manufacturing industries and the private mining industry to financial investment and speculation (including gambling), resulting in a local private lending crisis. In early 2011 the surging interest rates charged by private moneylenders, together with the central government's monetary tightening, led to a credit crunch among several SMEs, leading to many bankruptcies and debt fugitives. The local private lending crisis and the economic losses of owners and labor contractors in the private mining industry, coupled with a sudden recession in the local real estate market, all contributed to a local recession. Since about 2011, financial losses, debt, and stagnation have characterized people's somewhat dramatic lives. Local discourses about the economic recession have cast blame on the moral failures of "greedy" financial speculators who fled their debts, whereas nonspeculative "real" economic practices (*shiye*) at a smaller scale were revalued as moral, desirable, and secure.

Chen Yuming's work as a Daoist specialist is, to some extent, a barometer of the local private economy's ebb and flow. Born in the early 1980s, Yuming took up Daoist

rituals as a profession in the mid-1990s, when Haicheng was undergoing rapid economic development. Precisely because a Daoist ritual specialist's income comes directly from other people's expenditure of social surplus—the ceremonial fund for rituals in Wolf's (1966) model—Yuming's work tightly correlates with regional economic growth and economic downturns. Indeed, the professionalization of Daoist ritual specialists was induced by people's sudden increase in wealth. When Yuming first started, his profession was valued as work for a lifetime that would offer social respect, financial security, and upward mobility for rural youth in poverty. He enjoyed a golden decade from 2000 to about 2013, when there was a surge in local demand for Daoist "doing-good rites" (*zuohaoshi*), which correlated with the booming private mining industry in central and southwest China and the local real estate market. The local Daoist doing-good rites were believed to bring good fortune—prosperity, well-being, and safety—to living members of a particular household who commissioned the rituals.[14] During this golden age, Yuming and his colleagues always had to rush from one ritual site to another. If permitted by the customers or when a ritual was being held in temples of his Daoist master and his relatives, he could perform two rites in a single day and earn double or even triple daily wages.

Around 2013, however, after the credit crunch hit the region, the local demand for doing-good rites started to shrink. Yuming and his colleagues sensed the coming demise of their profession. Yuming rarely rushed to perform two rituals in one day in 2015 and 2016. The Daoist masters ceased taking in new students, saying, "There is no hope or future for this profession." Yuming, like many of his colleagues, is now seeking to quit Daoist work and find a different business. But in doing so he has encountered many difficulties and, as a result, resumed his Daoist ritual work.

To sum up, the national economy's transition to high-tech and green industries—coupled with periodic anti-corruption campaigns and the recent "state advances, private retreats" program in certain sectors—has had a profound effect on migrant workers and entrepreneurs (traders, salespersons, factory owners, managers, etc.), many of whom encountered credit bottlenecks in other parts of China (mostly in the mining, printing, and garment industries). The transition has driven these people to return to their home county and seek out new business opportunities. Locally, the credit crunch is contributing to Haicheng's economic stagnation. All these factors led a group of people into limbo as they adjusted their business orientations. Like Yuming, many are in a transitional state, planning to move into a more secure job or business. But it is difficult for them to switch to a new occupation in midlife or to upgrade their enterprise. Hence, some of them are feeling the threat of failure brought about by economic changes that they could not predict. Some are seeking ways of spending time and money that differ from the norm in

their social circles. Some have started to spend their time in volunteer activities, contributing to the main body of volunteers in Haicheng. And some of these volunteers later reinvent themselves as grassroots philanthropists who found and manage their own projects.

Remaking the value of work

When I asked what Haicheng's volunteers and grassroots philanthropists do for a living, the answer I often received was "They are all people in society [*shehuishang de ren*], very mixed [*za*], from all walks of life." Here, society (*shehui*) refers to the intermediary space in between the state and the family, including the market. *Za* (mixed) means that "one can find any kind of people [among the volunteers]," which also connotes a sense of orderlessness. The phrase "people in society" is comparable to the notion of private sector workers, and it often refers to the self-employed. Self-employment often involves a sense of being loosely organized and having a loose temporal structure.

The phrase "people in society" denotes laborers' social standing in China, shaped by the post-Mao transformations in organizations and the positive valorization of work. "The question of laborers and their dignity," as Wang (2016, 179) notes, has shaped Chinese society throughout the 20th century up until today. As Wang points out, the slogan "Laborers Are Sacred," coined by Cai Yuanpei, then the Beijing University president, in the 1910s, initiated the exploration of a new concept of "laborers" (*laogong*) that "combined 'laboring with strength' (manual labour) and 'laboring with mind' (mental labour)" (179). Succeeding revolutions and class politics all campaigned for he dignity of laborers. Such regimes in which work is valued persist into contemporary lives, yet they come into tension with market-based orders of worth, which tend to devalue manual work.

In preindustrial China, ideally, all work was organized around the household, which was the basic unit of production and reproduction (Harrell 2000). Surplus resources were mainly mobilized and distributed by local elites and clans within each community for those who did not have a "normal" household, such as widowers, widows, orphans, and single men (Leung 2001; Smith 2009). The 30-year period of Maoist high socialism transformed how work and social surplus was conceptualized and organized. During the state's era of socialist engineering (1953–78), all work was organized outside the household, either by agricultural teams in rural areas or by work units in urban areas. Another significant change in this period was that people were mobilized to expend their surplus labor as volunteers (*yiwu laodong*) by transforming themselves into subjects who were "selflessly" (*wusi*) devoted to the common (*gong*) cause, as opposed to any private (*si*) interest (Feuchtwang 2009, 6). Lei Feng (1940–62), a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, was held up as the ultimate symbol of a selfless person who dedicated all his surplus labor to "serving the people." Workers and farmers were celebrated and condemnation fell to those who hoarded surplus rations for themselves and were lazy in their work.

During the privatizations of the 1980s, however, agricultural teams were dissolved, many workers in state-owned enterprises were laid off, and many of that generation took up work in the private sector. This created a diversified and hierarchical workforce associated with differentiated yet shifting occupational prestige over time (Entwisle and Henderson 2000; Harrell 2000; Jankowiak 1993, 2004). Households returned to being the unit of production. Accompanying this was the state's rejection of class-based politics and the redefinition of *gong* (common) as "public-mindedness based on personal morality" (Feuchtwang 2009, 8). The question of how to spend time, expend labor, and direct goods became a matter of individual choice and familial duty. There are now many diverse ways to mobilize social surplus resources thanks to the resurgence of various religious, lineal, and social associations (Yang 2020).

This historical-social background sets up "people in society" as the antithesis of "people working in a work unit" (*danwei shangban*) or "people inside the system" (*tizhineide ren*). Nowadays, people refer to permanent workers in public institutions, including government bodies and state enterprises, as working in work units and as "inside the system." In Maoist socialism, a work unit in an urban area not only pays wages but also provides benefits, such as housing, medical care, and schooling (Walder 1986). As a legacy of Maoist socialism, people in a work unit "did not form relations with each other merely as producers; they formed persisting political, cultural, economic and familial ties and would engage in all manner of diverse activities" (Wang 2016, 200). In contrast, people in the private sector nowadays engage with their workspace merely as laborers or risk bearers. Partly owing to the legacy of the work-unit system and the unpredictable conditions of work in the private sector, people in Haicheng County view the work in public institutions as "formal or proper" (*zhengshide*), privileged, and thus desirable. This may be reflected in the fast-growing number of local young people vying to get an official work-unit job through the national public servant exams.

According to this historically saturated valuation of work as contingent on political economy, we can understand why grassroots philanthropists in contemporary China strive for recognition of their work by making it semiformal, adapting it to how a government work unit is run. The volunteers, in general, are interested in allying with and assisting government work, such as household visits and search-and-rescue work. Expending surplus time in doing philanthropy provides them with a sense of conducting

"formal or proper" work; it thus allows them to temporarily demarcate themselves from "people in the society"—people who are floating and unpredictable, the target of suspicion during economic downturns.

The following are three ways that people cocreate social arenas where their volunteer work may be recognized as valuable, that is, as formal, proper work that produces a "good person"—meaning someone who can serve the people by contributing to society.

First, a philanthropic organization office provides its members with a workplace, which is seen as an important feature of formal work. Almost all volunteer groups and organizations, big and small, hope to get an office. It seems that having an office—the material manifestation of an organization—plays a significant role in producing value, even though some of the offices are often empty. For instance, Song Jiang—a taxi driver and migrant worker—rented a spacious apartment as an office for his philanthropic organization, which was officially registered in 2015. Despite this, he spent more time driving a taxi than he did in the office, and there was no full-time or half-time staff in this 80-square-meter space equipped with four desks and two computers. Even so, he insisted on renting the office, which had become a financial burden for him. Writing project proposals in this office and receiving government officials or potential sponsors provided Song Jiang with the sense of having a formal job, enabling him to hope for a better future when he could fill the space with staff.

Second, each organization emphasizes its uniqueness and moral values, which they create by drawing on official symbols and local cosmologies centered on altruism and uninterested giving. For instance, many search-and-rescue volunteer teams design their team badges, uniforms, flags, and car plates to closely resemble those of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). I found that for many search-and-rescue volunteers, the image of a soldier, or cultivating a soldierlike persona, powerfully evoked respect and recognition. Because the soldier embodies masculinity, official recognition, and altruistic virtues, many volunteers want to imitate soldiers and embody the virtues as part of the self. Many volunteer teams have a full set of uniforms that resemble the PLA's Type 07 combat and training uniforms. They wear these when they train, compete, and participate in award ceremonies. Their training drills represent not only an outpouring of humanitarianism but also a spectacle of masculinity. Moreover, they name their organizational positions after those used in the PLA—directors, deputy directors, secretaries, and so on.

Third, the philanthropic organization provides not only a sense of formal work but also—and more importantly—a source of dignity, identity, and honor, which are all sustained by ritualistic social events. This is akin to working in a formal work unit. Almost all volunteers spend a lot of time together outside their charity projects in recreational social activities. In the daytime, I often found myself going on household visits to people in need, then hanging out in karaoke bars or late-night tearooms, having late dinners accompanied by drinking. There is also a wide range of *gongyi* (philanthropy) galas, where fundraising is not the primary goal. At these galas, volunteers and their families participate as organizers, audience members, security guards, and performers. Most galas involve feasts hosted at hotel banquet halls, making them indistinguishable from the gala feast put on by a local work unit or lineage association. The galas also provide opportunities for the volunteers' children to give performances onstage.

Although hosting the galas is expensive, they are occasions when volunteers and their families celebrate the moral community, especially at the end-of-year gala, in which volunteers and sponsors are given awards of various kinds. "The most beautiful enterprise" and "the most loving-hearted individuals" are given awards, as are those who devoted the most surplus labor to the community. These award ceremonies are almost indistinguishable from government award ceremonies; the organizers have copied the government's terminologies, styles, formats, and procedures. Ironically, the volunteers are often quite cynical about the rampant formalism that is encroaching on government bureaucracy, yet they themselves imitate the governmental form because it looks formal and official. At one end-of-year gala, Yuming was awarded the prize for "most beautiful volunteer." His reward statement read, "When the masses [*qunzhong*] needed him the most, he stood out because he has firm convictions." This sounds very similar to how a self-sacrificing soldier or policeman would be praised by the state reward system. In fact, Yuming mentioned to me more than once that he admired soldiers.

At the same time, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly invests in social management that foregrounds party leadership and community building (Pieke 2012), grassroots philanthropic networks have adopted new names, such as CCP "red cells" and "community philanthropy" (*shequgongyi*) stations. CCP and Youth League members have been appointed as "directors," and CCP grassroots branches have been set up inside these grassroots organizations. All these positions make the volunteers' leadership and membership appear official and formal. Nevertheless, this cannot be taken as evidence of an actual extension of party governance—as it appears in its symbolic and media presence. On the contrary, these CCP and Youth League branches are more like a "red coat"; they rarely play a role in the organization and operation of Haicheng's grassroots organizations. In this sense, while grassroots actors gain legitimacy from making themselves appear official and "red," the local government also gains legitimacy from being associated with grassroots

organizations that are doing good. In fact, many beneficiaries receive volunteers and sponsors who "come from the government" and often conflate private charitable with government-funded aid.

Grassroots philanthropy as a dynamic, shifting, and unstable process

Despite the post-Mao economic reforms, many anthropologists have detailed the ongoing impact of the Maoist socialist era on contemporary everyday life in China (e.g., Rojas and Litzinger 2016; Zhang and Ong 2008). My ethnographic study of grassroots philanthropy also sheds light on Maoist socialism's legacies in contemporary China, in particular the valuation of work. It is precisely the changing valuation of work in China that has, in part, led many people to become volunteers. The current political and economic restructuring has made the labor of certain groups of people marginal.

Because being idle and loosely organized is seen as morally disreputable, some of these people, particularly men, are anxious to expend their relative surplus labor and time doing philanthropy that produces additional moral values, such as dignity and self-esteem, as a way to gain recognition as good persons. Given that these volunteers and grassroots philanthropists are mostly self-employed in the private sector, their remunerated work is loosely organized and entails much risk in the context of the current economic restructuring. Some also have a sense of failure, being indebted or feeling insufficient to provide for their families. Hence, some take refuge in volunteer work, where success and failure are not measured by monetary gains. Managing volunteer organizations and performing philanthropic work provides these volunteers with a sense of being organized as part of a formal institution and with a sense of participating in social development. Having a workplace, participating in the moral discourse on their work, and performing the various formalities that imitate official recognition of their work—all these legitimize their volunteer work and their efforts to become good men who are "able and responsible" (Wong 2020). This puts in question the alleged role that China's so-called moral crisis may have in these people's lives, highlighting that the social valorization of work is central to their ethical life, particularly in the context of economic precaritization.

It is precisely their precarious and relatively marginalized socioeconomic conditions that allow these volunteers and grassroots philanthropists to formulate a grassroots politics based on an affect of empathy with their beneficiaries, whom they identify with as "ordinary people" who have a shared past and a shared future. In this relational form of giving in a late-socialist context, people imagine care for others in a way that differs from the bourgeois philanthropy of neoliberal capitalism, which is shaped by dualistic economic inequality and the transnational, northern-led humanitarianism that is premised on imaginaries of "distant" suffering (Ticktin 2014, 275) and structured around "racial and civilizational hierarchies" (D. Li 2021, 231). Such a remaking of the value of work features in how people imagine their roles and how they experiment with ways of contributing to social change. As such, in addition to class, religion, kinship, and political party, which are common organizing principles of other kinds of charity and volunteerism, these ordinary people's shared imaginations, aspirations, and anxieties connect them to seemingly novel forms of social organization in contemporary China.

To realize the value of their work, they have cocreated a new set of symbolisms, but these are temporary, unstable, and subject to constant negotiation. Although grassroots philanthropists attempt to have closer relationships with the local government and make their work appear formal and organized, the value of their work is not often recognized by their families, social networks, and the local government, and this continually challenges their sustained commitment. Moreover, unstable funding coupled with the growing pressure to provide for their families has led some to shut down their organizations or quit as managers after five to 10 years of commitment.

Thus, the contemporary rise and growth of grassroots philanthropy in China is a dynamic, shifting, and unstable process, one that is filled with negotiations and disruptions, and one that lacks a clear end point. This complicates the common understanding of volunteerism, charity, and humanitarianism, according to which these practices do have an end point: they are thought to transform participants' ethical subjectivities (e.g., Caldwell 2016; Muehlebach 2012; Rozakou 2016); to realize moral values (e.g., Bornstein 2012; Weller et al. 2017); and to fulfill political, social, and ethical needs (e.g., Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Malkki 2015; Trundle 2014). Moreover, an analysis of philanthropy that privileges the role of religion or state technologies would miss the multifaceted nature of grassroots actions that are intimately connected to the economy. After all, ordinary people have complex moral and extramoral motivations for doing good, motivations that are entangled with, yet cannot be reduced to, those that often feature in the literature on this phenomenon—status seeking, civic duty, altruism, public virtue, nationalism, Christian-infused notions of love, Buddhism-infused notions of making merit, and notions of universal goodness.

Notes

1. Names of places, organizations, and people have been changed to protect the anonymity of my research participants.

2. The term *caogen* has a close affinity to the Chinese concept of *minjian* (people's realm). In Yang's (1994, 288) framing, *minjian* refers to "a realm of people-to-people relationships that is non-governmental or separate from formal bureaucratic channels." Much of the social science literature on the contemporary rise of philanthropy in China explores changing state-society relations and sheds light on the role of private philanthropy in inducing social change. I engaged with this debate in my PhD dissertation (Fengjiang 2019) and won't go into the details here, since it is not the focus of this article.

3. QQ and WeChat are two of the most popular social media platforms in China. They offer services such as instant messaging, group chat, microblogging, and voice and video calls.

4. It should be noted that I use the term *philanthropy* as an etic term. This aligns with Benthall's (2017) review of the "anthropology of charity" for the purpose of cross-cultural comparisons. I choose the term *philanthropy* instead of *charity* because it connotes an institutionalized formation.

5. Compared to the synonymous terms *cishan*, *yixing*, and *shanju*, which have a long history in China (Smith 2009), the term *gongyi* is modern, having first appeared in the late 19th century (H. Wu 2018).

6. I use the term *ordinary people* in the sense broadly defined by Narotzky and Besnier (2014, S4).

7. Whereas in other contexts "grassroots" NGOs are often well connected with international organizations (e.g., Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Litzinger 2009), in China they are subject to powerful state regulation. In 2016 a significant policy shift led to a drastic cut of local organizations' ties with international organizations and funding.

8. In this article, I follow anthropologists who distinguish between ethics and morality: the term *morals* refers to customs and codes of conduct, while *ethics* emphasizes people's attempts to do the right thing according to a certain moral subjectivity or to break the rules because they believe they have a "good" reason for doing so (e.g., Stafford 2013, 4).

9. For instance, some anthropologists suggest that volunteers embody a new notion of "universal goodness" (Weller et al. 2017, 2), a new and "generalized notion of compassion and charity" (Yan 2011, 66), an enhanced "public morality" (Yan 2021, 120), a new kind of "modern, entrepreneurial, and responsible selves" (Fleischer 2011, 300), or an "ethics of the heart" (Ning and Palmer 2020) that responds to the diversification of moral frameworks.

10. If the local government purchases social services from social organizations, volunteers may receive a small remuneration in the form of a standard lunch or transportation subsidy. The remuneration ranges from 20 to 100 yuan (US$3–$15) a day.

11. Among the chronically unemployed young people who work as community health workers and NGO field staff in parts of the Global South, many also aspire to transform their paid and unpaid volunteer work into a professional "career" (e.g., Prince and Brown 2016). But they have only limited opportunities to do so. In contrast, many people in China see several opportunities to institutionalize their volunteer work.

12. Unlike religious charity, in which volunteers embody a certain bodily manner and are mobilized around a particular religious notion of goodness that distinguishes them as "better persons" (Weller et al. 2017, 122), no singular religious notion of goodness is explicitly used to mobilize volunteer participation and fundraising in grassroots philanthropy.

13. For instance, the economy of northeast China has been dominated by state enterprises; there, the privatization of state enterprises in the 1990s brought about mass layoffs and urban unemployment (Cho 2013), which is quite different from the case of southeast coastal China.

14. In the region, the "doing-good rites" are usually performed for a living. In contrast the rites of "making merit" (*zuo gongde*) are usually performed to save the souls of the deceased in mortuary and postmortuary rites.

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