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ORIGINAL PAPER

Striving to be Pure: Constructing the Idea of Grassroots Philanthropy in Chinese Cyberspace

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Abstract This paper describes the features of grassroots philanthropy as viewed by the participants. Using content analysis, we show that while the mainstream discourse focuses on efficiency, accountability, and professionalism, the grassroots discourse focuses on the individual aspects, viewing philanthropy as small good deeds, a personal spiritual journey, and something that brings happiness. To avoid making this personal journey impure or less happy, the grassroots philanthropists resist practices such as formalization and professionalization. They also distance themselves from corporates and bureaucracies which they view as corrupt and hypocritical. The grassroots' discourse has its roots in the traditional Chinese culture, and is also shaped by the realities of the transitioning Chinese society, where citizens are searching for meaning, values, and support. Such a discourse has profound influence on the organizations that embrace the grassroots values and may also impact the development of the Chinese nonprofit sector.

Keywords Grassroots · Philanthropy · China · Cyberspace · Discourse

Introduction

In existing literature, grassroots philanthropic organizations (GPOs) in China are often portrayed as a marginalized and vulnerable group: They are needed by the government to provide valuable social services but are prevented from entering the formal nonprofit system because of the government's fear of strong grassroots power (Ma 2006; Saich 2008; Watson 2008). Without legal identity, they are subjected to the abuse of administrative power and have to use various strategies to avoid offending the government or to win the favor of the government in order to survive (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Ru 2004; Spires 2011). Scholars believe that partially because of the government's bullying, GPOs are unable to engage in self-development and therefore are largely small and unprofessional (Lu 2009).

Vivid as such portrayals are, the grassroots' voices are unheard. They were hidden behind the closed-ended questions of surveys or behind interviews with a research agenda narrowly focused on the government–civil society relationship. Some researchers may have assumed that with conventional media controlled by the authoritarian government and Internet censored by authorities, Chinese grassroots people are also a voiceless group. In reality, however, in Chinese cyberspace, citizens are discussing all types of topics that they choose freely (Esarey and Xiao 2008; Herold 2008; Rosen 2010; Tang and Yang 2011), and they are more active than their Western counterparts in initiating new topics and commenting on other people's posts (Sullivan 2012). Many of the GPOs are organized online (Tai 2006). Their leaders and members also actively express, in cyberspace, their ideas about philanthropy, the nonprofit system, civil society, and so on. As our paper will show, the focus of their discussion is vastly different from the focus of the existing research literature. The grassroots philanthropists are resisting a dominant power. However, the dominant power is not the government's nonprofit registration and regulation system, but rather the mainstream ideas of philanthropy and nonprofit organizations in

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China, which feature neoliberal values such as efficiency, accountability, and professionalism. In recent years, the government has been promoting these ideas through the mainstream media as well as social media. Many of the well-established nonprofit organizations and prominent nonprofit leaders are also supporting such ideas, thus creating a strong dominant discourse regarding what philanthropy is and how philanthropy should be done.

This paper does not claim to give a voice to the voiceless, but it rather seeks to bring the grassroots voices in cyberspace to the attention of the research community. Such voices are of great significance because from a Foucauldian point of view, discourse can be not only the instrument and effect of power but also a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy (Foucault 1990, p. 101). In the past, within subordinate/dominant structuration, the subordinates were unable to articulate a position for themselves because the voice and the ability to call were controlled by the dominant. Now, with the development of Internet, particularly the Web 2.0 technology, the subordinate can "voice their individual persuasive discourses and hope to enter into a dialog with the dominant in the interconnected cyberspace" (Mitra 2001, p. 32). In China, with the formal nonprofit system still under formation, rules and regulations being discussed, and boundaries being negotiated, the grassroots discourse may play a significant role in shaping the future formal system.

In this study, we use various online texts produced by the grassroots philanthropists and their organizations, such as organizational web pages, blog posts, and forum discussions, all of which are publicly available. Chinese grassroots philanthropists are saying these things to themselves, to each other, and to the invisible audience sitting at their own computers. By analyzing these texts, this paper describes the central features of grassroots philanthropy (as defined by the participants themselves), explores possible reasons that contributed to such perceptions, and discusses how such views of grassroots philanthropy influence the development of GPOs and the nonprofit sector of China. Furthermore, situating our discussion in the broader context of the rise of neoliberalism, we discuss how the Chinese grassroots philanthropists' struggles are both similar to and different from the struggle that happens in the voluntary nonprofit sector in other countries.

Overview of Grassroots Philanthropy in China

In this paper, we define grassroots philanthropy (*caogen gongyi*) as public interest or charitable work organized by individuals who self-identify as grassroots (*caogen*), as opposed to programs offered by mainstream charitable organizations or public and semi-public institutions.[1] In the Chinese language, "the grassroots" or "ordinary people (*pingmin baixing*)" means the opposite of "high officials and noble lords (*daguan guiren*)". In the popular Chinese cyber culture, being ordinary people also means being "ant people (*yimin*)", "fart people (*pimin*)" or "nobody (*diaosi*)", implying a powerless, penniless and sometimes hopeless status, just the opposite of "tall, rich, and handsome (*gaofushuai*)", "fair, rich, and beautiful (*baifumei*)", and "luxury, large, and level up (*gaodashang*)" (Yang et al. 2014). Although previous studies have noted that currently, being "nobody" in China is more a matter of self-identification than real socioeconomic status (Szablewicz 2014; Wu and Chen 2014), most of the grassroots people do not have tremendous wealth, political power, or social influence.

The grassroots in China can of course participate in philanthropy through making contributions to mainstream charitable organizations or public institutions. The rate of participation is not low because in the work-unit (*danwei*) system, when local governments assign donation quotas to employers, supervisors may require employees to make contributions (Du et al. 2014; Sui 2007). Grassroots in China can also participate in philanthropy by forming their own organizations or joining such GPOs. This kind of participation should be more voluntary than participation through work-unit-based donation or volunteering.

[1] Due to the special social and political context in China, many organizations can claim to be private nonprofit organizations. Some of these have very strong governmental background, such as the All-China Women's Federation, China Disabled Persons' Federation, and the All-China Federation of Youth. They all claim to be non-governmental and not for profit. It is true that they are providing crucial services to women, children, youth, and the disabled. However, they are either under direct leadership of the Party-sate or have current or retired government officials acting as president. Most of them also employ civil servants and do not have to go through nonprofit registration. They are really public institutions. Some other organizations, such as Soong Ching Ling Foundation, and China Red Cross, also have high level of government involvement. Even though they are not under the direct leadership of the government, they also employ civil servants. They are considered semi-public institutions. Besides, there are also organizations that were set up by government. For instance, the China Youth Development Foundation was created by the Communist Youth Leagues. The China Children and Youth Foundation were created by the All-China Women's Federation. These are often considered government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). In addition, there are organizations created by corporations (e.g., corporate foundations), celebrities (e.g., One Foundation, established by Jet Li), prominent scholars, overseas nonprofits, international organizations (e.g., Oxfam, Save the Children), religious institutions, and so on. In a way, to define grassroots in China, one cannot define what they are, but needs to define what they are not. This approach was adopted by some previous scholars (see, for instance, Zhou 2015). In this study, as discussed in the main text, in addition to defining grassroots as the opposite of mainstream, we also adopt a strategy of self-identification.

However, it is also more risky. Although the constitution states that citizens have the freedom of forming associations, in reality, to prevent the formation of strong grassroots groups that could challenge its authority, the Chinese government has built a stringent nonprofit registration system, making it hard for grassroots groups to obtain legal nonprofit status (Ashley and He 2008; Lu 2009; Ma 2006). It is estimated that there are several million unregistered grassroots organizations operating in China (China Daily 2011; Deng 2010; Watson 2008). According to the law, unregistered organizations are all illegal entities.

GPOs have drawn much research attention. Much of the discussion has come from the government-civil society perspective and looked at how the GPOs struggled with the authoritarian government. Researchers believed that the hostile environment created by the Party-state is detrimental to the development of GPOs. It is hard for them to mobilize resources, build capacity, and improve performance (Ru 2004; Spires 2011; Spires et al. 2014). Partly because of the government's bullying, Chinese GPOs often have low capacity (Lu 2009). They are usually small and informal, without full-time staff members, office space, or even an organizational bank account. They have vague rules regarding organizational governance and management and lack proper accountability measures (Zhou 2015).

Discourse and the Unanswered Questions About Chinese GPOs

One can of course view the GPO problem in China through the lenses of civil society, corporatism, institutionalism, or neoliberalism, as the existing literature already has (see, for example, Hsu 2010; Kang and Heng 2008; Shieh 2009). In this paper, however, we want to provide a new angle: text and discourse. It has been said that many social issues are essentially issues about representation and subjectivity, which concerns the access to and control of text, as well as the right to describe, analyze, and explain. It also involves how one is being "named, positioned, desired, and described in what languages, texts, and terms of references" (Luke 1999, p. 5). Viewed from this angle, GPOs in China seem to be a group that lacks representation, and their subjectivity has largely been left out of the discussion. Throughout the years, the GPOs have been studied, discussed about, and spoken for through mainstream media (e.g., TV and newspaper), new media (e.g., blogs, websites, and microblogs), and academic publications. We have heard fragments of their voices in research papers, news reports, or speeches of prominent leaders. Most often, these research papers, news reports, and speeches are either preoccupied with the government–civil society relationship or use frameworks that are entirely foreign to grassroots in China, which is perhaps why existing literature has failed to explain some important phenomena.

For instance, in the Western democratic and economically advanced countries,[2] the majority of the voluntary organizations are unregistered grassroots groups (Soteri-Proctor 2011; Soteri-Proctor et al. 2016). They are unregistered, not because of government oppression, but because they do not yet meet the registration requirements, or they do not see a need to enter the formal nonprofit system (Smith 2000). In recent years, in Europe and in the USA, scholars have observed an increased bifurcation of the voluntary nonprofit sector into grassroots organizations and large corporatist organizations (Milligan and Fyfe 2005; Wolch 1999). Such a phenomenon is sometimes attributed to the rise of neoliberalism and its erosion of the voluntary nonprofit sector by over-marketizing the nonprofit organizations, reducing them to the government's contractor rather than partner, and discouraging activism. The grassroots organizations' decision to stay small, informal and far from the formal system is seen as a strategy to resist the neoliberal ideology. Then, if GPOs in China remain informal for a long time, is it truly because the authoritarian government has prevented them from getting resources?

Moreover, even though the GPOs existing today were all established after China opened up in the 1980s, philanthropy has deep roots in traditional Chinese culture. Throughout the past thousands of years, the Chinese lords and ordinary Chinese people have organized to help themselves and one another (Fuma 2005; Smith 2009; Zhou and Zeng 2006). This tradition was violently disrupted by war and social chaos in the first half of the twentieth century and 30 years of tight communist control afterward. Modern charities today might be a new thing China learnt from the West after the Market Reforms, but they could also be a continuation of the Chinese tradition, or more likely a mixture of both. Then, is it so abnormal that Chinese GPOs or the Chinese nonprofit sector in general does not look like its counterparts in the West?

[2] We used "West" or the "Western countries" to refer to the economically advanced countries which adopt free market economy and a democratic political system (e.g., North America and Western Europe). We acknowledge that this is a Cold War term and that the East–West dichotomy overlooks regional hybridity. However, in many fields, such as management (Ichijo and Nonaka 2006), international relations, intercultural communication (Cheng 2003), and sociology, this term is still being used. To avoid getting into details regarding differences in each culture and society, we opt to use this simple East–West divide. More importantly, the term "West" has a special meaning for the Chinese citizens, as in the past, the term was used to describe those countries who were the enemies of the communist regime. Mao Zedong famously said: "This is a war between two worlds. The West Wind cannot prevail over the East Wind; the East Wind is bound to prevail over the West Wind." (Mao 1986, p. 775).

Furthermore, existing studies tend to focus on how the omnipresent and powerful Party-state in China has influenced GPO development. However, the government is not the only player shaping the living environment of the GPOs. Other players, such as corporates (as donors), individual citizens (as donors, volunteers, or customers of nonprofits), and other formal nonprofits (as competitors or collaborators) may also influence GPOs. From a Foucauldian point of view, modern power is insidious; it is diffused and embodied in discourse, knowledge, and regimes of truth (Foucault 1991). In our case here, the GPOs not only live in an environment where unfriendly registration policies prevent them from entering the formal nonprofit system but also operate in an environment with existing beliefs about how philanthropy should be done.

In recent years, the dominant idea about philanthropy in China is that philanthropy should be conducted by professionals in formal organizations in a transparent and accountable way (Boao Forum for Asia 2012; China Philanthropy Research Institute 2014; Nanfang People 2014). The idea was constructed as a result of the rise of neoliberalism in China, which favors individual responsibility, work ethic, competition, free market, and so on (Harvey 2007; Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012). Influenced by neoliberalism, the Chinese government has been advocating for the privatization of welfare provision, trying to encourage nonprofit organizations to serve as independent service providers (using donated money) or as the government's contractor (Corbett and Walker 2012; So and Chu 2012). Thus, instead of merely tolerating the unregistered GPOs and taking advantages of whatever services these organizations can provide (Ashley and He 2008; Spires 2011), the government now promotes the professionalization of the philanthropic organizations. One of their strategies is to loosen up the registration rules, so that qualified service providers could gain legal nonprofit status more easily.

Some scholars and activists that have been advocating for GPO rights for decades see this as a good opportunity, and encourage GPOs to enhance their capacities, so that they could meet the government registration standards. In some places, various governmental or non-governmental nonprofit incubators have been set up to help GPOs build organizational capacity and prepare them to enter the formal nonprofit system. At the same time, the formal nonprofit organizations also need to be brought up to standard, as the sector has been plagued by charity scandals (China Charity Information Center 2011). Scholars, the mainstream media, and some prominent organizations are all pushing for efficiency, professionalism, transparency, and accountability, which is in line with the government's agenda. With the joint efforts, the mainstream ideas have now been institutionalized by the 2016 Charity Law. The law clearly describes charities as legally registered organizations with office space, charters, work regulations, financial reporting procedures, volunteer management system, and so on. It seems that the living space for GPOs has been compressed to the minimum. These organizations will either have to disappear or become mainstream charities.

Is this true? We have seldom explored the perceptions of the Chinese grassroots philanthropists. Maybe we have assumed that their opinions are the same as the mainstream ones, or this group is too vulnerable to speak for themselves, or the power difference between them and the dominant group is so large that their ideas will not influence the mainstream idea, let alone impact the future development of the nonprofit sector in China. As we will argue in the next section, although the GPOs with limited financial, human, and social resources seem to be powerless, this does not mean they do not have ways to resist the dominant power (if they want to). They are in fact, neither voiceless nor powerless.

The Marginalized Group, Alternative Discourse, and the Internet

One major element in the discursive reproduction of power and dominance is the access to discourses and communicative events. Not every individual or group in the society has equal access to the media or to legal, political, and scholarly text and talk. Those who have access are in a relatively powerful position. They can control the action and/or minds of other powerless groups by limiting their freedom of action or influencing their knowledge, attitudes, or ideologies (Foucault 1980; van Dijk 1995). The subordinate group, lacking a channel to express itself and sometimes also lacking a language of its own, often become a muted group.

Over the years, "giving voice to the voiceless" has become a slogan in both academic research and advocacy work. It has been shown again and again that when the subordinate group is given a chance to voice its persuasive discourse and enter into dialog with the dominant group, the power relationship in the society can be changed. The mental patients' liberation movement (Chamberlin 1990; Varghese 2015) and the "autism spectrum identity" (Brownlow and O'Dell 2006; Davidson and Henderson 2010) are just some examples of previously powerless and voiceless groups gaining power through gaining voice. In some countries, when neoliberal ideas such as philanthrocapitalism, social enterprise, and cause-related marketing start to over-marketize the voluntary nonprofit sector, threatening to eliminate the public space within which citizens can invent solutions to social problems and serve the public good, researchers call for constructing a

democratic counterdiscourse to resist the colonization of the market (Eikenberry 2009; Moulton and Eckerd 2012).

From a theoretical perspective, giving voice to the voiceless involves actions in at least two levels: First, providing the voiceless a platform from which to be heard; and second acknowledging the discourses of the subordinate groups as legitimate. The former is relatively easy to achieve currently, as the powerful parties in society, such as government and corporations, recognize that it is important to engage stakeholders and seek stakeholder input. However, the latter is much harder because it enables the confrontation and contestation of widely held views. It is through the confrontation and contestation that alternative modes of thinking could be developed. Otherwise, we will just be "legitimating what is already known" (Foucault 1987, p. 9).

The Internet, in particular the participatory and transparent social media platforms, is a new channel for the subordinate groups to speak out and be heard. In this relatively open space, anyone can self-publish, self-broadcast, engage with others in discussions and debates, and call for online and offline actions. Although the dominant institutions (e.g., the government and corporations) still have considerable control in cyberspace, there is also constant struggle against these institutions to keep cyberspace open (Deibert et al. 2012). In China, for instance, even under notorious censorship, common people are able to use innovative strategies, such as online spoofs (*E Gao*; Meng 2011), political satire (Yang and Jiang 2015), and meme (Szablewicz 2014) to challenge the official political discourse, which is rigid, formalized/stylized, saturated with propaganda and ideological rhetoric. The funny but vulgar term "*diaosi*" that we mentioned earlier was invented online by ordinary citizens in China. Facing an increasingly unequal society and the apparent lack of upward socioeconomic mobility, citizens use this term to describe their underdog identity. Some have compared "*diaosi*" to "proletariat", which were the basis for the communist revolution. Although the *diaosi* are far from launching a revolution, their collective critiques of the social conditions in contemporary China cannot be ignored. Even the highly formal and propaganda-saturated official media, such as People's Daily, had to report the *diaosi* phenomenon (Yang et al. 2014). These examples show that cyberspace can sustain multiple authorities in the construction of meaning, in which the authority of traditionally dominant discourses is challenged by the rise of competing discourses.

In short, the Internet has provided a new channel to "give voice to the voiceless". In cyberspace, despite censorship, subordinate groups can challenge the authority of traditionally dominant discourses. Unfortunately, in the previous studies on Chinese GPOs in cyberspace, researchers were mostly interested in the political meanings of online expressions or the strategies people use to fight against censorship; the non-political and non-confrontational expressions and mobilization in cyberspace were overlooked. This oversight could be one of the reasons why systematic review of such a grassroots discourse is rare even though many GPOs are organized online and actively express their ideas about philanthropy and nonprofit work online.

What we know about the GPOs (and their members) is mostly produced by the dominant institutions: the government, the mainstream media (both at home and abroad), and the social scientists. How do the grassroots philanthropists view their work and their organization? How does their view influence their behavior? How might their belief influence the nonprofit sector in China? In the following sections of this paper, we will attempt to answer these questions.

Methods

Qualitative content analysis was adopted to analyze the online texts produced by the GPOs and their members (Cole 1988; Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This is a method for systematically describing the meaning of textual data (Mayring 2000; Schreier 2014). Using this approach, we try to understand the grassroots philanthropy discourse, how it was produced, how it was influenced by various social realities, and how it influences (or may potentially influence) social practices.

Collection of Texts

GPOs in China work in various fields. In this study, we focus on rural education organizations. We choose this group for several reasons. First, they are mostly service providers. As previous studies have noted, the instrumental organizations, i.e., those that are established to meet non-members' needs or to influence society are more likely to be pressured to professionalize than the expressive ones, i.e., those that are set up to meet members' needs (Abel 1986; Panet-Raymong 1987). In recent years, when the Chinese government piloted a simplified registration system, priority was given to social service organizations. Second, even though we do not have a census of all GPOs in China, statistics tell us that more than half of China's registered nonprofits are involved in education, rural development or social service provision (China Ministry of Civil Affairs 2014). It is likely that GPOs working in rural education also constitute a large proportion of the entire GPO population. Moreover, when there is a sizeable mainstream counterpart, there will also be a strong mainstream discourse (e.g., a discourse that is related to rural

education services) that the GPOs will have to struggle against. Third, compared with GPOs working in sensitive fields (e.g., labor rights and HIV prevention), rural education organizations are less likely to create posts that might offend the government. Thus, they are more likely to be vocal online and less likely to become victims of censorship, providing us with sufficient data for analysis.

We collected the online text mainly from two sources: the organizational websites/blogs/forums/microblogs of GPOs and the personal blogs/microblogs of GPO leaders and members. The GPO websites are identified through an online snowball process. We started from a sample of grassroots rural education organizations that were identified in our previous study and added new organizations by looking at the "links" section on their websites and forums or the "friends", "followers", and "followees" on their blogs and microblogs. Newly identified organizations were screened to make sure that they are indigenous Chinese organizations (any international, foreign, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Macau-based organizations were excluded). We also screened out any organizations with governmental, corporate, celebrity, academia, and religious background. Individual blogs and microblogs were identified by collecting the accounts that had reposted or made comments on the messages of the organizational accounts. In this process, we identified 52 GPOs. Among them, some were not interested in issues such as the meaning of philanthropy or the development of the nonprofit sector in China. They mainly used the Internet for internal communication (e.g., events information for members or free chat among members that is not related to philanthropic work), or resource mobilization (e.g., call for volunteers, call for donations, and financial reports). Some organizations were involved in the discussion about grassroots philanthropy, but mainly through reposting other people's essays and adding comments. In the end, we included the 12 most active organizations in our study. Their members and leaders actively initiate posts about grassroots philanthropy and comment on other people's opinions. Some of their posts were also reposted by many other organizations and individuals, indicating that their opinions have a large audience.

From the 12 organizations (organizational accounts and members' individual accounts), a total of 219 documents were identified through an exhaustive search and collected together with comments. The two researchers, both native Chinese speakers, read all posts on the website/blog/microblog account of a given organization and collected the posts that included (1) discussion related to the definition of philanthropy (*gongyi*)/charity (*cishan*)/social service (*shehui fuwu*)/nonprofit organization; (2) discussion of the current nonprofit policies and practice, both mainstream and grassroots; (3) reflection on individual/organizational involvement in rural education, including its influences on self and others; and (4) general discussions related to values and beliefs. The documents collected were of various lengths. Some could be just under 100 words, and some could be approximately 1000 words. There was also one online diary kept by an organizational leader, which covered 10 years and consisted of 780,000 words.

We did not, however, include any news articles from traditional news websites because those are not produced by GPOs and the participants themselves.

Analysis of the Text

Although some researchers advocated for counting the frequency of different phrases and analyzing the pattern of textual data using statistical methods, we adopt a qualitative and grounded approach to our data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Mayring 2000; Patton 2002), attending to three intersecting domains of analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough and Chouliaraki 1999; Gee 2014). The first level of analysis was open coding on the text level, where we coded the online posts and developed two large categories: (1) what grassroots philanthropy is and (2) how grassroots philanthropy should be done. We focused on how the authors of these online texts define themselves, what it means to be a GPO in the contemporary Chinese context, and how they maintain a distinction with other philanthropic practices.

Through the process of aggregating and assembling the data, we grouped the codes into different themes and constructs and developed three metacodes that were continually applied and tested against the research literature (Miles et al. 2013). The first metacode was that the grassroots' definition of philanthropy often dialogs with traditional Chinese culture, religion, and some official discourses of patriotism and altruism, which confirms previous scholars' assertion that discourses do not have discrete boundaries (Gee 2015). The second metacode was the grassroots philanthropists' resistant identity (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004), i.e., how their definition of philanthropy differs from the mainstream ideas and how such a definition was constructed as a response to various social realities in China. The third metacode we developed focused on the inconsistencies and contradictions within the grassroots philanthropy discourse. For example, the grassroots philanthropists loathe the corruption of government and official organizations but at the same time praise these same institutions as hard-working welfare providers.

Next, we moved from description and interpretation to explanation. We examined how the online discourses about philanthropy constructed by GPOs are produced in the interaction of multiple social domains, such as development, welfare state, and civil society, situating the online

discourse practices of GPOs in the transitioning Chinese society, where an old system is being dismantled and a new system is yet to take shape.

Findings

Core Features of Grassroots Philanthropy: Small Good Deeds, A Spiritual Journey, and Happiness

Confirming findings of previous studies, GPOs in our study are mostly involved in small-scale but labor intensive projects, such as visiting rural children in their homes and connecting them with urban donors, clothing drives, book donations, or picking up garbage in parks.

Although the GPO leaders and members do not have a uniform definition of themselves, several themes emerged from their discussion regarding what they do and who they are. First, philanthropy is giving a helping hand to others when they are in need, and it does not always involve much effort. Many people described it as "doing small things to help people (*jü shou zhi lao*, or literately, an effort as small as lifting a finger)" or "doing one good thing a day (*ri xing yi shan*)". These claims are not hard to understand because, for ordinary individuals, it is almost impossible to engage in significant philanthropic projects, such as sending a private disaster relief team to earthquake affected areas (as Chinese billionaire Chen Guangbiao did in 2014), inviting NBA stars for a charity game to raise money for rural schools (as Chinese celebrity basketball player Yao Ming did in 2014), or publishing a bestselling book and using the income to endow scholarships and bursaries (as former premier Zhu Rongji did in 2013). Regarding themselves as "common (ordinary) individuals", small good deeds are perhaps the only thing they can do. However, the grassroots philanthropists do not think they are forced into doing trivial things because they lack the capacity of engaging in more significant projects like those initiated by celebrities, entrepreneurs, and public figures. They believe there are different types of philanthropic activities:

> Philanthropy is a very broad concept. It may mean helping poor students in the remote mountain areas, or the need (for your help) could be right by your side… Every morning on my way to work, I pass by [name of a building]. There are some security guards…Could we give them a bottle of water during hot days? Why? I don't want to discuss it in detail. I just think we should do it. I have done it.

In fact, many people believe that one "should not refuse to do good things just because a certain act is trivial (*wu yi shan xiao er bu wei*, Chinese proverb)", for small things will lead to bigger changes, and if one does not do small things, one will never achieve anything big: "If you do not clean one room, how can you clean the whole world? (*yi wu bu sao, heyi sao tianxia*, Chinese proverb)". They often urge others that if one wants to participate in philanthropy, one should "stop looking around, just start by doing small things by your side".

Second, the GPO leaders and members define philanthropy as a "spiritual practice (*xiuxing*)". It is a personal journey, which sometimes has a religious meaning, and they believe it is a practice that will turn them into better people. For example, central to the Buddhist teaching is the idea of compassion. One is required to "do good things (*xing shan*)" to obtain heavenly reward (and avoid punishment) for oneself and one's family either in this life or in the next life (Laliberté 2003; McCarthy 2013). In the online discussions, it is common to see terms and phrases such as "salvation (*jiushu*)" and "soul-comforting (*weijie xinling*)". People claim that when helping others, they have helped themselves. Some even say that the ultimate goal of philanthropy is self-help, while helping others is a means to the end.

For many others, however, the spiritual practice means doing good things without expecting a reward from the beneficiaries, society, or heaven. Such a belief perhaps has its roots in the Confucian tradition. A virtuous individual according to Confucian teaching possesses both "benevolence (*ren*)" and "righteousness (*yi*)". He/she shall happily fulfill responsibility to society without caring what he/she gets in return (Li 2003; Yu 1998). Especially, a virtuous individual shall not pursue wealth (*li*) and fame (*ming*). For instance, a prominent grassroots philanthropist in one of his blog post, criticized people who "expect too much" from their philanthropic work. He urged his readers to adjust their attitudes. A reader echoed his concern in the reply section and wrote that "It (philanthropy) becomes a burden…we lost motivation, because in the process, we started to care for fame and wealth…and our ego began to expand." To prevent the development of egoistic ideas about philanthropic work, one leader criticized the mainstream ideas of linking philanthropy with terms such as "noble" and "angels". He believed that "a philanthropist is no different from a construction worker; both are common laborers" and that philanthropy "has nothing to do with love or social responsibility".

In addition to battling against one's ego, in this spiritual journey, one also has to learn to face frustration because one is not supposed to stop until "achieving the highest excellence" (*zhi yu zhi shan*). One grassroots philanthropist used the analogy of Sisyphus, who was destined to roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again: "This is the meaning of my work: It is unrealistic to expect that I can change someone's life, but I light little sparks in people's hearts…When I am carrying my rock and walking

on a road that leads to destined failure, please do not mock me."

Third, philanthropy is something that makes one happy. Although many people talk about helping the less fortunate or embarking on a journey of self-salvation, more people associate philanthropy with happiness. For some, happiness is derived from the feeling of being able to help others: "I made a contribution, and therefore I am happy." It is considered one of the nation's greatest traditions "to take pleasure from helping others (*zhuren weile*, Chinese idiom)". For others, philanthropy brings happiness because it takes them away from the routine of everyday life; it is a form of recreation, just like "taking a walk after work, swimming, playing a ball game, or drinking tea. Relaxing, happy, and full of fun." To make sure that the happiness brought by participating in philanthropy will not be ruined, people are advised to (1) take care of their own life (e.g., work and family needs) first; (2) do not go beyond one's capacity, and (3) avoid "unrealistic thoughts and expectations". Some even suggested that one should not become too involved in philanthropic work:

> We think philanthropy is beautiful, and we long to contribute to the work wholeheartedly…this is because we have not yet started the work or have just gotten involved. If we do it too often, eventually, it will become something plain. It is often said that a picture seems more beautiful when it is viewed at a distance…Life is the same. We need to have some distance in life and leave some peaceful space in our philanthropic work. This way, life and philanthropy will be lively, fresh, and full of hope.

If one takes philanthropy too seriously, someone warned, it will "haunt you in your dreams" and "lose its meaning as a form of recreation". One leader, for example, confessed that he once took his philanthropic work too seriously. "The feeling was horrible." He wrote, "I dreamed about it and felt as if I had lost my soul." After this painful experience, he told himself that "Next time I should do less. The most important thing was to keep a happy mind."

In sum, there are three key components that are highlighted by the participants of grassroots philanthropy to understand who they are and what it means to engage in grassroots philanthropy: small good things, a spiritual journey, and happiness. Traditional Chinese religion, philosophy, and culture seem to be the basis for the grassroots' construction. The buzz words that often appear in the existing academic literature, such as civil society, democracy, civic participation, and accountability, are seldom mentioned.

Identity Boundaries of Grassroots Philanthropists: Ideal Grassroots Philanthropic Work and Ideal GPO

An important aspect of constructing an identity is to differentiate self from others because after all, to exist is to differ, and identity is but a type of difference (Tarde 1893/1999 as cited in Adler 2009). Thus, for the grassroots philanthropists, defining "who they are" is not enough. They must also define "who they are not" through their narratives and practices. Overall, the grassroots philanthropists try to maintain a clear boundary between what they do and other types of philanthropy and professional works, namely the "mainstream" ones. In their individual philanthropic work and their organizations, the grassroots philanthropists act according to their beliefs and resist those practices that go against their beliefs, namely anything that would make their spiritual practice impure or their work less happy.

First, the grassroots philanthropists make a clear distinction between their "pure motivation" and the elites (celebrities, for example) that are doing philanthropy to "show off". The grassroots philanthropists despise practices of "showing off" and insist that philanthropy should be "low-key". In the forums and blogs that we visited, there were many stories about corporates or celebrities engaging in philanthropy to make a show. The grassroots philanthropists resist the entertainment/show-oriented "business". They feel disgusted by these actions and use discursive strategies to make sure that they and their organizations will not be linked with such showing-off behavior in any way. Some said that they turned down the corporates' or celebrity groups' proposal of collaboration because "this will just be another show". One grassroots group even mocked a common Internet user who suggested that the organization should hold a special event or press conference to celebrate the success of their work. The leader wrote that "We appreciate Mr. Li's support for our organization. However, we cannot accept your praises that we are truly altruistic and noble… As for things like celebration and press conference, hehe (a sarcastic way of laughing in Chinese cyber culture used to express feelings such as derision or 'no comment'), we have never thought about it."

Second, even though grassroots philanthropy is supposed to bring happiness and should feel like leisure, it is not leisure. All participants should take the work seriously, and personal dedication is perceived as a key to success. For instance, many of the grassroots organizations bring urban residents to the rural areas to conduct needs assessments, deliver financial or in-kind assistance, or engage in short-term volunteer teaching. It is fine that participants tour the countryside while carrying out their philanthropic

work. In fact, many of the organizations started as travelers' clubs (or in their own language "donkey clubs" because hikers call themselves "donkey fellas [*lüyou*]" in China). Some still call their activities "outings" (or "pulling the mill [*lamo*]" because donkeys were used to pull mills in rural China). However, grassroots philanthropists believe that having fun should not impede their philanthropic work, and they do not identify with the popular idea of voluntourism (Brown 2005; Corti et al. 2010). There are several stories about people who "abandoned" their volunteer positions to tour the countryside and others who spent most of their time and money on site-seeing, while leaving very little to contribute to the rural community. These stories were posted and reposted many times to the blogs and forums of various organizations, serving as bad examples that people should never follow. Almost everyone that responded to these stories criticized the behavior, saying that these people were not here to help, but to make trouble. "In our team, everyone should be dedicate to their jobs spontaneously." A grassroots leader wrote, "Relying on people to do people-related work is the feature of our philanthropic work … Have some self-awareness, and have some self-discipline!"

Third, as the grassroots philanthropists perceive themselves as "*diaosi*", they believe they are no different from the people they desire to help. Thus, they call for respect in their work and remind each other that they should not act as if they were the savior:

> Some of us have this kind of attitude (of being a savior) in their sub-consciousness… (when you have this kind of attitude), you put the needy one in a somewhat lower position in your mind. Then, in your interaction with him/her, you do not show respect. Everyone has dignity. Even a slave deserves to be respected when receiving help.

As we have mentioned earlier, some grassroots philanthropists also resist the linkage of their work to terms such as "noble" and "angels". These terms are popular in mainstream discourse of philanthropy, and both imply power and status differences between the philanthropist and the beneficiary.

Fourth, some of the grassroots philanthropists resist any kind of bureaucracy, including collaborating with any bureaucratic organizations (government or government-organized non-governmental organizations, a.k.a. GONGOs) and forming internal bureaucratic systems. One volunteer, for example, decided to drop out of an organization. She made a blog post showing a picture of a banner that read "our school thanks the government and [Organization's name] for the new library". This volunteer wrote that "Now I have doubts about the real identity of [the organization]. I will never participate in their programs again." Another grassroots leader, responding to someone's proposal to formalize their organization, wrote that "I am against making [Organization's name] a formal organization… (because formal) organizations possess all kinds of characteristics to make you terrified." Later, he also stated that "If one day [Organization's name] becomes a 'bureaucratic non-governmental institution,' I will refuse to be part of it, even though I am the founder". Because of such aversion toward formalization, the grassroots philanthropists do not care that their organizations lack legal identity and that they themselves are engaging in illegal activities. In their own words, they believe that "one does not need a license to do good things". Of course, as noted by previous studies, as the Chinese government is "opening one eye while closing the other", there is sufficient space for the illegal organizations to survive and thrive (Ashley and He 2008).

It should be noted that although there is a strong resistance toward the government, the grassroots philanthropists are not anti-government—in fact, some said that "philanthropy is a form of patriotism". The grassroots philanthropists may criticize the government and GONGOs, but they still recognize the contribution of such institutions and believe that certain things should be done by the government and that the influence of the grassroots organizations is very limited:

> The provision of basic education is the government's duty. We are just supplementing the public education system in the remote mountain areas. We are not the main player here. Likewise, we are not the main player in changing the living conditions for people in the mountain areas. This is such a major problem, that it has to be the responsibility of the government. If we take it on as if we were saviors, we would be overwhelmed by the difficulties.

Even though they do not desire to enter into a formal collaborative relationship with the government, many believe that they are assisting the government:

> I think our role is that of the government's helper…We need to always remember this: The government has done a lot. But the country is big and complicated. Hence, there are always blind spots. So, can we help with these blind spots?

To vividly describe the division of labor between the government and the GPOs, one leader said that "The government constructs the wall; we fill in the small spaces between the bricks."

Lastly, the grassroots philanthropists resist professionalism, which includes various kinds of practices that are currently being promoted by both the government and the nonprofit scholars. For instance, they are strongly against

using paid full-time or part-time staff, insisting that "philanthropic work needs to be done by volunteers because only unpaid volunteers are purely altruistic, and hence, only volunteer work is meaningful." Furthermore, if philanthropy becomes a job for them, it will significantly reduce their happiness. The grassroots philanthropists are also against establishing internal rules and regulations or setting work procedures, believing that such practices would harm personal freedom: "Harm to personal freedom or restriction of personal freedom is terror. Human spirit means freedom. Restriction-free is the source of happiness." Moreover, the grassroots philanthropists have a very negative opinion regarding experts. In their eyes, experts indulge in only empty talk:

> When I am hungry, you establish a humanitarian club to discuss hunger; when I have no clothes to wear, you talk and talk about whether I have violated any moral rules; when I got beaten up, you make long speeches about crime rates, looking angry; when I am homeless, you take a walk in your garden and tell me about God's mercy. You look holy, noble, and kind, while I am by your side, trembling with cold and hunger. Philanthropy should not be about the format and should not involve empty talk.

The grassroots are less aversive toward other professionals, such as social workers. However, they are not willing to adopt certain practices, such as program planning and evaluations. "Do not think too much", wrote one individual in his/her blog post, "Too much planning and description will just make things complicated. It is meaningless to think without taking action." As for evaluation, it was perceived as totally unnecessary because demanding an impact of their work seems to violate the rules of their "spiritual practice". "Only God can change people." One individual wrote in his blog, "We only do the things within our capacity." Another leader further stated that changing another person is an egoistic thought. "No matter how pitiful this individual is, you do not have the right to change him/her. This is his/her life, and only he/she can decide whether to change it."

In short, the grassroots philanthropists distinguish their work from various other kinds of "philanthropic" practices. These other kinds of practices are perceived as impure (e.g., the "showing-off" corporates and celebrities and the "voluntourism" people whose real purpose is to tour the countryside) and hypocritical (e.g., people with the savior attitudes and experts with empty words). Sometimes, these other practices will also make philanthropic work less happy. If their belief in pure and happy philanthropic work is rooted in traditional Chinese culture, their aversion for the other types of philanthropic practices might stem from social reality in China today. They have read stories about the "showing-off" celebrities and corporates and stories about irresponsible voluntourism participants. GONGOs in China have been involved in a series of scandals. The public's trust in these official philanthropic organizations has decreased significantly (China Charity Information Center 2011). When these negative stories circulate on the Internet, some people might decide to form their own GPOs so that they will not be forced to make contributions to the organizations that they despise. Existing GPOs may also feel compelled to distance themselves even further from the bad examples so that in the eyes of their (potential) members/donors/beneficiaries, they are legitimate. In this process of legitimating themselves, the grassroots philanthropists reinforce their definition of grassroots philanthropy.

Discussion

In this paper, we described the major features of grassroots philanthropy as viewed by the participants. Since our sample only includes rural education organizations, who work in a field that has received cross-sectoral support, our findings probably could not be applied to other grassroots groups working in sensitive and controversial fields, such as HIV/AIDS, labor rights and human rights. These other organizations experience different power dynamics and their resistance and opposing strategies are likely to be different. Nevertheless, our findings can still be generalized to grassroots organizations working in fields similar to rural education, such as poverty alleviation, and elder care.

The grassroots' view we described in our paper is fundamentally different from the mainstream discourse of philanthropy. While the mainstream view focuses more on the organizational/institutional aspects, such as efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, accountability, management, and governance, grassroots discourse focuses more on the individual aspects, emphasizing individual motivation, individual discipline, and individual personal gain. While the mainstream discourse advocates for practices that will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the charitable sector, the grassroots discourse resists all practices that might make their personal journey impure or less happy.

The mainstream view of philanthropy in China reflects to some extent neoliberalism's global influence on the voluntary nonprofit sector (Hsu 2010). As mentioned earlier, such an influence has been noted by many nonprofit researchers and practitioners. Most often, in the Western developed world, the concern has been about nonprofits losing their role in advocacy or being reduced to the merely the government's contractor (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012). There has been fear that "active citizenship" will be lost (Milligan and Fyfe 2005). As our data show, the Chinese

grassroots members have rejected the neoliberal discourse, too. However, their struggle with the neoliberal ideology is different. They do not seem to worry about resources and would even refuse resources. Advocacy was never a strong concern—our sample may be just social service organizations, which are not usually involved in advocacy; studies show that even environmental organizations in China are for various reasons not strong in advocacy work (Ho 2001, 2007; Lu 2007), and those organizations that are involved in advocacy often lack grassroots support (Economy 2011; Ho 2007; Yang 2005). The grassroots in our sample were equally uninterested in democracy or being treated as a partner rather than contractor of the government. The grassroots were not even interested in being linked with the government. In general, it seems that while the struggle in the Western countries is related to power and resources, the struggle in China is more ideological, like a personal struggle for "the highest excellence", not only to achieve it but also to define and clarify what "the highest excellence" is.

It is possible of course that the Western's nonprofits' struggles, as presented in the research articles, are just views of the scholars, rather than that of the grassroots. However, there are special historical and social contexts that make the Chinese grassroots' experience with neoliberalism special. The modern Chinese voluntary nonprofit sector emerged almost at the same time as the Market Reform happened. In other words, nonprofits in China never had a chance to experience what a world without neoliberalism would be like: The organizations had never been the government's partner, were never allowed to advocate in a confrontational way, and had experienced only democracy with Chinese characteristics. Unlike nonprofits in Western countries that see neoliberalism as a threat, in China it was the neoliberal reform that gave citizens the room and resources to form associations (Ma 2006). It was also the neoliberal reform that caused many social problems such as unemployment, mass migration, and rural–urban disparities that made the GPOs indispensable (Spires 2011).

At the same time, the neoliberal reform also caused an ideological crisis (Kwong, 1994). In the past, there was one value and belief system and one official discourse, that of communism, to explain social phenomenon and to guide people in times of confusion. Now, that system is gradually fading and giving way to many other values and beliefs. There are even multiple official discourses. During the Market Reforms, the authoritarian and yet entrepreneurial Party-state mobilized the nation by constructing various official discourses: To promote economic growth, the communist collectivism was denied and replaced with an individualistic neoliberal market philosophy (Steele and Lynch, 2013; Yan, 2010). To justify why a communist government could dismantle the socialist welfare system and let people fall through the service gaps, the long-abandoned precepts of Confucianism, which emphasizes personal obligations and family responsibilities, were revitalized (Bell 2010a, b; Guo 2012; Levenson 2013). Many other mainstream ideologies, such as "harmonious society" (Tu 2004; Zheng and Tok 2007), "scientific development" (Fewsmith 2004), "small government, big society" (Lei and Walker 2013), and "the Chinese Dream" (Wang 2014) were invented one after the other. Unfortunately, none of these seem to explain let alone offer solutions to the problems that citizens observe: bureaucracy, corruption, lack of responsibility, empty talk, and so on. With the help of the relatively free cyber world, citizens set out to construct their own value system. The grassroots philanthropy discourse in China is just one example of citizens' anxiety in a transitioning society.

Citizens' construction cannot happen in a vacuum. They draw on various pieces of other discourses, many of which are mainstream. For instance, the Chinese traditional religion, philosophy, and culture that served as a basis for the grassroot construction are in fact a revived version that serves to defend the government's legitimacy. Many components in the revived version, such as pure altruism and deriving happiness from helping others, are in line with the communist discourse. Sometimes, it seems that Mao's good soldier Lei Feng, who devoted "the finite life to the infinite cause of serving the people" (Zhang 1999, p. 115) is making a comeback in Confucius' or Buddha's teaching, only the collectivist discourse has been changed to a much more individual one.

Many of the things the grassroots oppose are also criticized by the official discourses. For example, the Chinese government is also anti-corruption, anti-bureaucracy, and anti-empty talk. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping himself when leading the country to reform dismissed various kinds of ideological discussion and said that "Empty talk harms the nation; practical action helps it thrive (*Kongtan wuguo, shigan xingbang*)". The exact sentence was repeated by Xi Jinping in 2012. Moreover, altruism rather than "showing off" is what the government promotes. Every year, for example, China Central Television (CCTV, a state television broadcaster) organizes the "People who moved China (*Gandong Zhongguo Renwu*)" campaign, recognizing individuals who made significant contributions to the country. Thus, what the grassroots are fighting for is in fact in line with what the government promotes. Perhaps the grassroots are resentful that there is more empty talk than decent services. As a result, they reject those beautiful mainstream terms such as "angel" and "noble".

One may ask that the more Westernized ideas of philanthropy, civil society, and nonprofit organizations are also available for the grassroots to use as materials when

they construct their own identity, but why the grassroots did not choose to use them. The reason could be twofold: First, all other discourses that the grassroots picked up have deeper roots in China and enjoyed promotion through the government's propaganda machine. Thus, the grassroots were immersed in these various discourses. The Western ideas, however, never enjoyed such popularity. They might even have been suppressed by the government. For instance, the Chinese government has blocked popular Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, so that discussions relating to China's violation of freedom of speech or lack of democracy could not be accessed by common citizens (Sullivan 2012). Second, the Western ideas are mostly being promoted by scholars. As we have shown, grassroots have an aversion toward scholars and their empty talk. It is not surprising that while the scholars have been enthusiastically discussing concepts such as civil society and civic participation for more than 20 years, the grassroots are rather indifferent.

Being influenced by the mainstream ideologies that caused social problems (e.g., the emphasis on individual and family responsibilities that justifies government's retraction from welfare provision), the grassroots' construction is full of contradicting values. For instance, among the many values that are related to neoliberalism, they reject efficiency and professionalism but seem to embrace individualism. They have drawn on the most individualistic parts of the old philosophies and emphasized personal motivation, personal dedication, and personal gain. At the same time, they all try to identify themselves as grassroots or "*diaosi*" despite their real socioeconomic status, which reflects a desire to connect and belong (Yang et al. 2014). They despise government corruption and seek to distance themselves from the official institutions. However, they also subscribe to a discourse of state-centered patriotism that the Party-state has been promoting to legitimize its authority (Vickers 2009). Hence, they show no interest in challenging the current social structure and political system, which might be the root of various problems. On the contrary, they are quite sure that the government should be the major player in welfare provision and speak positively of the government's achievement in trying to improve people's lives. As patriotic grassroots people, they believe their responsibility is to discipline themselves to be better individuals, which in turn will help society become a better place. Such a phenomenon has also been noticed by other researchers. They argued that this form of neoliberal citizenship was deliberately promoted by the Chinese government to displace criticism of the Party-state and disinterest people from participating in social actions on the ground (Yu 2017).

The grassroots discourse is constructed in cyberspace as resistance to the mainstream discourse of philanthropy. As mentioned earlier, cyberspace sustains multiple authorities in the construction of meaning, in addition to the mainstream discourse and the grassroots discourse that we have discussed in this paper; there are of course other views on philanthropy. Even among the grassroots people, it is likely that there are multiple viewpoints. As previous studies have noted, some GPOs do professionalize over time and become mainstream charities (Zhou 2015). What we have described in this paper is just one group that actively resists the mainstream ideas. Its voice is loud enough to attract mainstream attention. Some mainstream organizations feel compelled to respond to the grassroots. Some, for instance, have said that the grassroots identity is just a typical defense mechanism in the Chinese culture, known as the Ah-Q mentality, which includes self-protective rationalization, externalization of blame, and belittling others' achievements (Foster 2006). One foundation leader argued in his online post that grassroots identity is an excuse: When the amateur do-gooders cannot commit to philanthropic work and cannot ensure high-quality service, they resort to arguing that people should not put too much pressure on the grassroots and that whatever they do is good enough. In the eyes of the mainstream nonprofits, GPOs' lack of efficiency and effectiveness are a waste of time and resources. However, the GPOs, too involved in their personal struggles, do not seem to care.

The grassroots philanthropy discourse's influence on the nonprofit system in China could go beyond the GPOs that fully embrace such values in both positive and negative ways. For instance, as many believe that philanthropy should be conducted only by volunteers, donors are not willing to cover administrative cost, making it hard for organizations that wish to hire full-time staff to pay enough salary and benefits. At the same time, the grassroots philanthropy discourse promotes the ideas of pure altruism and grassroots mobilization, which may mobilize more people to participate in philanthropic work. It also puts pressure on those mainstream organizations that are less transparent or are indeed involved in inappropriate financial practices. The fact that citizens are making donations to these informal and sometimes illegal entities sends a message to the mainstream charities that there are competitors in the field, and if they do not reform, they may lose a substantial amount of resources.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, some GPOs do formalize. They establish formal structure, hire full-time professional staff, evaluate the impact of their program, and register with the government. They may become less extreme than the "*diaosi*" described in this paper. However, they still hold on to some of the values. Some organizations, for instance, may refuse corporate donors'

unreasonable requests and even educate donors about designing programs according to the needs of the community. Some may work with the government to provide services but are not interested in receiving government funding (and be bound by the strings attached to the funding). Neither are they interested in receiving funding from international organizations or foreign nonprofits. It is possible that these organizations will become the pillar of the independent nonprofit sector of China.

To conclude, in this paper, we described a group of grassroots philanthropists who actively resist the mainstream discourse of philanthropy and have created their own competing discourse. The grassroots philanthropy discourse has its roots in traditional Chinese culture and various official discourses. It is also shaped by social realities of China today. Such a discourse not only influences the GPOs but also may have a substantial influence on the entire nonprofit sector in China. Most importantly, we have utilized a new angle and new approach to study grassroots organizations, whose representation and subjectivity is often missing in existing literature. Researchers in other societies may want to use similar approaches to re-understand the nonprofits in their countries. The renewed understanding and renewed perspectives will enable the development of new research areas, as well as new practices in the nonprofit sector.

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