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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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China's 'bad citizens': understanding non-participation in philanthropic and voluntaristic activities

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ABSTRACT

In response to increasing socio-economic inequalities, the Chinese state has promoted the idea of the 'good citizen' who engages in philanthropy and volunteerism. This study explores why some individuals in China choose the converse, to be 'bad citizens' by not participating in these activities. Utilizing data from four waves of the Civic Participation in China Surveys (CPCS) conducted in 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024, the study suggests that the behaviour of such non-participants are influenced by their immediate social circle, their general perceptions of donating and volunteering, and their level of support for the government. These findings have significant implications. The existence of bad citizens conceptually highlights the presence of a 'skeptical citizen' who does not fully align with the state's vision of the model citizen. At a more general level, the study provides a profile of bad citizens that enables the development of targeted policies to incentivize charitable giving and volunteering, and promote greater civic engagement.

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Introduction

In 2021, the Chinese government proudly declared the eradication of absolute poverty, defined as an annual income of 2,800 RMB (~390 USD), marking a milestone achievement enabled by decades of rapid economic growth. This narrative of continued national progress is deeply intertwined with the state's new focus on philanthropy and volunteerism – framing charitable giving and civic participation as a citizen's duty under the vision of 'common prosperity' (*gongtong fuyu*) (see e.g. J. Hsu et al., 2023). The concept of 'tertiary distribution' (*sanci fenpei*) further reinforces the expectation that individuals should actively redistribute wealth and resources to support the less fortunate (see e.g. Hasmath and Hsu, 2020; Hu et al., 2023).

Yet, this policy rhetoric contrasts with persistent challenges on the ground. Despite state-led efforts to promote civic engagement, charitable giving in mainland China remained comparatively low throughout the 2010s; although in recent years in the 2020s there has been a relative uptick in philanthropic activities (Hasmath and Wei, 2022). Volunteerism participation has similarly lagged, even as the state has employed various mobilization strategies (see Zhao and Lilly, 2022). Recent policy initiatives, such as the revised 2023 Charity Law, have sought to centralize donations under state-controlled platforms, further complicating independent philanthropic efforts. Furthermore, the state has encouraged local Party cells to take a more active role in volunteer recruitment, potentially shaping civic engagement in ways that prioritize state influence over grassroots participation.

This gap between state messaging and actual citizen participation raises a critical question: why do certain citizens in China actively choose not to engage in philanthropy and volunteerism? Scholarship has primarily centred on the 'good citizen' – those who align with state expectations and participate in civic activities, particularly in times of crisis (Hasmath et al. 2022). However, understanding the 'bad citizen' – those who resist engagement despite strong state advocacy – offers a crucial perspective on the tensions between top-down state directives and individual agency.

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This study leverages four waves of data from the Civic Participation in China Surveys (CPCS) conducted in 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024 to examine the motivations, social dynamics and political attitudes shaping non-participation. By investigating these patterns, we aim to illuminate the evolving landscape of civic engagement in contemporary China and the role of scepticism in shaping citizen behaviour.

The structure of the article is as follows: First, we outline the theoretical framework that informs our analytical approach. Next, we describe the study's methodological design and present key findings. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of our results for philanthropic and voluntaristic activities in China, both in the present and for the future.

Framework

Citizenship is a social construct that is specific to a particular time and place (see e.g. Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Thus, understanding good and bad citizenship responses is essential to address the varying needs and desires of both the state, which seeks to govern and understand its citizens, and the individuals who constitute the citizenry. According to Dalton (2009, p. 21), the notion of a good citizen is based on an internalized 'set of norms of what people think they should do as a good citizen'. Although the socialization process involves interactions between state and community ideas, the conceptualization of the good citizen typically originates from a top-down perspective. Schudson (1998) asserts that political systems ultimately instruct citizens on the behaviours expected of them. Moreover, as the interests and goals of those within the political system evolve, so do the conceptions of good citizenship. Specifically, the concept of the good citizen is framed for a particular purpose by those in positions of power: '(elite) actors enact the frames within which (ordinary) citizens then enact/perform their good citizenship' (Pykett et al., 2010, p. 527).

In authoritarian contexts, this top-down construction of citizenship is reinforced, where exposure to citizenship education leads to the internalization of a state-led conception of citizenship characterized by obedience and loyalty to the state (Lee and Ho, 2008; C. Hsu et al., 2022). In the Chinese context, the preferred image of the citizenry is predominantly shaped by centrally issued policies and the national curriculum. Zhang (2018, p. 857) posits that the Chinese government employs both enabling and coercive methods in its construction of citizenship. Explaining political participation at the village level in China, O'Brien (2001, p. 423) argues that citizenship 'is less granted than won, less accorded than made'. In contemporary China, notions of good citizenship can be understood as existing between top-down 'passive citizenship', granted by the state, and bottom-up 'active citizenship', constructed at the subnational level through citizen-led, community-oriented activities (C. Hsu et al., 2022).

The characteristics of good citizens are ultimately defined by the acts and performance of citizenship, rather than the status one holds (see e.g. Kymlicka and Norman, 1994). Relying on this behavioural definition, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) distinguish between duty and engaged citizenship, proposing a typology of 'personally responsible citizenship', 'justice-oriented citizenship' and 'participatory citizenship'. There is overlap between Western liberal democratic conceptions of good and bad citizenship and how these ideas are conceived in China. For example, Bennett's (2007) 'dutiful citizen' emphasizes the role of duty in motivating individual behaviour, potentially aligning with Confucian ideals present in mainland China (see e.g. DuBois, 2015). Similarly, Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) 'personally responsible citizen' – who picks up litter, donates blood, recycles, volunteers, avoids debt, and responds in times of crisis – resembles a Chinese-style, communitarianism ideal.

Most understandings of citizenship originating from Western liberal democratic contexts present a vision of the good citizen that deviates from Chinese societal and state perspectives (see e.g. Zhao, 2023). For instance, Dalton (2009) identifies participation in voluntary groups in Western contexts as a key aspect of 'engaged citizenship', which includes the independent formation of opinions and political involvement. Crick and Lockyer's (2010) 'active citizenship' values revolve around influencing public life and building civil society. Norris' (1999) notion of a good 'critical citizen' aspires to democratic ideals. Even in Western democracies, notions of good citizenship can sometimes emphasize engagement that preserves, rather than challenges, the political status quo. For example, Newman (2011) contends that in the UK, 'ordinary citizens' are valued, while the more 'participatory citizen' is viewed with suspicion.

When examining the concept of the bad citizen, Morrison (2003, p. 278) argues that this cohort is constructed and framed in service of the good citizen: 'the bad citizen is via fantasy a source of enjoyment for the good citizen'. Analytically distinct but related, Thorson (2015) posits a 'do-it-yourself' model of

citizenship, emphasizing individual agency to engage in or abstain from civic life. This mirrors the bad citizen in ancient Athens – an individual disinterested in public affairs who, despite having the opportunity and responsibility to participate, chooses not to (see e.g. Christ, 2006).

In the Chinese context, bad citizens who do not participate in charitable giving or volunteerism may be akin to what Ke and Starkey (2014) label an ‘insouciant bystander’ (*kanke*). While these individuals hold citizenship status, they lack a sense of solidarity with others and fail to take action to address needs and suffering. It is quite plausible that *kanke*-oriented citizens are not inherently bad, but rather their ‘badness’ lies in their conscious decision to opt-out of participatory citizenship. This could be analogous to Howard’s (2003) findings in post-Communist states, where non-participation is an act of defiance against repeated state mobilization. Such individuals may opt out of citizenship not necessarily as an overt protest against the state, but rather in response to perceived socio-economic conditions that fall short of expectations – reflecting a sense of disillusionment or withdrawal from societal pressures. Brown (2019) examines this in the context of neoliberalism undermining the promises of liberal democracy, a phenomenon epitomized by the ‘lying flat’ (*tang ping*) movement in recent years in China; these individuals, notably young university graduates, reject societal pressures to overwork and overachieve (see e.g. B.B.C., 2021).

Depending upon what underpins non-participation, bad citizens in the Chinese context could be seen as ‘cynical’ in that they see the government, and larger social order, as unresponsive, unfair and unchangeable. The cynic, per Steinmüller (2014, p. 11), is aware of conventions but refuses them; cynicism can range from ‘despondent resignation’ to ‘courageous acceptance’ of reality. Not surprisingly, cynical citizens typically have low levels of trust in the government (Nesbitt-Larking and Chan, 1997). ‘Critical’ citizens identify the same problems, may also have low levels of trust in the government (Taniguchi and Marshall, 2014), but still believe change is possible through individual action (Zhao et al., 2017). Or, for the purposes of this study, inaction. Tsai’s (2015) notion of ‘constructive noncompliance’ is instructive here. Accordingly, non-participation can function as an important feedback mechanism for citizens to register their concern or discontent over policies and social problems.

While our framework emphasizes the dual processes of citizenship formation – top-down state-led constructions and bottom-up community-oriented enactments – we acknowledge that our operational definition of the bad citizen as a non-participant in charitable giving or volunteerism reflects both dimensions. These behaviours are increasingly promoted by the Chinese state as markers of civic virtue, aligning with official expectations. At the same time, they resonate with emerging local norms around solidarity and mutual aid. Thus, non-participation signals a misalignment not only with state-defined ideals, but also with evolving community standards. This conceptual integration allows us to treat bad citizens as a meaningful indicator of disengagement within a hybrid civic landscape.

Methodology

Data

To discern the characteristics of China’s bad citizens (who we also refer to as ‘non-participants’), data from four waves of the Civic Participation in China Survey (CPCS) in 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2024, are utilized (Hasmath et al., 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024). CPCS is an online survey of urban residents looking at individual philanthropic and volunteering behaviour, and perceptions of civic engagement. CPCS 2018 surveyed Chinese citizens in October 2018 ($N = 1,402$), CPCS 2020 from December 2019 to February 2020 ($N = 4,999$), CPCS 2022 from December 2021 to February 2022 ($N = 5,003$), and CPCS 2024 from December 2023 and March 2024 ($N = 5,012$).

The CPCS uses stratified, random sampling techniques, and surveys six urban centres across various regions of mainland China that vary in terms of both population size (2022 figures) and local GDP (2022 figures in CNY): Shanghai (pop: 24,759,000; GDP: 4480.910 billion), Beijing (pop: 21,843,000; GDP: 4,154.09 billion), Wuhan (pop: 13,739,000; GDP: 1886.643 billion), Changsha (pop: 10,421,000; GDP: 1358.756 billion), Kunming (pop: 8,600,000; GDP: 754.137 billion) and Luzhou (4,263,000; GDP: 215.722 billion).

The CPCS involves both multiple choice and ranking questions. Key individual demographic information gathered by the survey included age, gender, number of children, city and Communist Party membership. In

addition, key socio-economic information collected included level of education and individual/household income (see Hasmath et al., 2025 for more information).

Due to potential sampling variances between the various CPCS waves and the national profile of urban residents – as elucidated in the National Bureau of Statistics of China's 2018 Statistical Yearbook – were tested with both weighted and unweighted demographic variables. As there were no significant variations in the findings pertaining to the analysis presented in this study, the weighted models were not included.

Analytical strategy

In this study, we examine civic participation through two specific outcomes: charitable giving and volunteering. We categorize good citizens as those who both donate and volunteer, while 'non-participants' are those who neither donate nor volunteer. Between these extremes, we identify 'donors' (individuals who donate but do not volunteer) and 'volunteers' (individuals who volunteer but do not donate). Following extant research (e.g. Shehu et al., 2015, Paxton et al., 2020), we account for demographic variables such as income, age, location and Communist Party of China (CCP) membership. Table 1 provides a comprehensive summary of the variables included in our analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Dependent Variables					
Charitable Donations			Volunteer		
Do Not Donate [=1]	N	%	Do Not Volunteer [=1]	N	%
	4,076	24.83		4,956	30.19
Donate [=0]	12,340	75.17	Volunteer [=0]	11,460	69.81
Bad Citizens					
Donate and Volunteer	9,363	57.04	Donate but not Volunteer	2,977	18.13
Volunteer but not Donate	2,097	12.77	Neither Donate nor Volunteer	1,979	12.06
Explanatory Variables					
State Level					
State Provides Help to Disadvantage Groups			Citizens Should Support the State		
Does Not Provide [=1]	4,449	27.10	Should Not Support [=1]	3,048	18.57
Does Provide [=0]	11,967	72.90	Should Support [=0]	13,368	81.43
Social Organization Level					
NGOs are Necessary to Help Society			Citizens Should Contribute to NGOs		
Not Necessary [=1]	474	2.89	Should Not Contribute [=1]	9,745	59.36
Necessary [=0]	15,924	97.11	Should Contribute [=0]	6,671	40.64
Social Circle Level					
Family and Friends are Donators			Family and Friends are Volunteers		
Do Not Donate [=1]	3,837	23.37	Do Not Volunteer [=1]	4,720	28.75
Donate [=0]	12,579	76.63	Volunteer [=0]	11,696	71.25
Donators Act Out of Altruism			Volunteers Act Out of Altruism		
Not Altruistic [=1]	3,103	18.90	Not Altruistic [=1]	9,035	55.04
Altruistic [=0]	13,313	81.10	Altruistic [=0]	7,381	44.96
Control Variables					
Gender			Age Level		
Female	8,442	51.43	18~22	2,999	18.27
Male	7,974	48.57	23~29	4,120	25.10
CCP Member			30~39	4,646	28.31
Yes	2,331	14.20	40~49	2,791	17.00
No	14,085	85.80	50~59	1,108	6.75
Have College or Above Degree			60+	750	4.57
Yes	11,299	68.83	Number of Children		
No	5,116	31.17	0	9,099	55.43
Household Monthly Income (Yuan)			1	5,001	30.46
0–4,999	1,058	8.08	2	2,067	12.59
5,000–9,999	2,630	20.09	3+	249	1.52
10,000–14,999	3,738	28.56	Cities		
15,000–19,999	2,527	19.31	Beijing	2,779	16.93
20,000+	3,135	23.95	Shanghai	2,541	15.48
Survey Year			Changsha	2,520	15.35
2018	1,402	8.54	Wuhan	2,519	15.34
2020	4,999	30.45	Kunming	2,507	15.27
2022	5,003	30.48	Luzhou	2,496	15.20
2024	5,012	30.53	Others*	1,054	6.42

*The 'Other' category accounts for additional cities that were a part of the first wave (2018) of the survey.

While charitable giving and volunteering are widely recognized indicators of civic participation, we acknowledge that they represent only a subset of the broader repertoire of civic behaviours. Other dimensions such as legal compliance, ethical conduct and adherence to social norms are vital attributes in evaluating civic virtue. For instance, public figures like Han Liu and Jiaying Xu were once celebrated for their philanthropic contributions, but later faced scrutiny for unethical and illegal business practices. Our operationalization is therefore not exhaustive. Nonetheless they reflect two highly visible and state-endorsed forms of civic action in contemporary China.

To methodologically justify these categorizations, we draw on typologies of civic participation found in existing literature. For instance, the differentiation between donors, volunteers and non-participants has been widely recognized as significant in understanding the spectrum of civic engagement. Previous research has demonstrated that these groups exhibit distinct behavioural patterns, motivations and demographic characteristics, which are crucial to consider when examining their impact on civic participation (e.g. Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011, Cnaan et al., 1996). Moreover, this typology allows us to explore how different forms of civic engagement may be differently incentivized, perceived or constrained within the Chinese socio-political context.

To analyse these categorical outcomes (see Figure 1), we employ multinomial logistic regression, a statistical method designed for dependent variables with more than two discrete, unordered categories. This approach is appropriate given our interest in comparing multiple forms of civic behaviour simultaneously. Multinomial regression compares the likelihood of being in each category relative to the reference group. In our analysis, 'non-participants' (those who neither donate nor volunteer) serve as the reference category, with coefficients set to zero. Positive coefficients indicate a higher likelihood of each civic behaviour category (donate only, volunteer only, or both) relative to non-participation, while negative coefficients suggest a lower likelihood. To enhance interpretability, we also present average marginal effects. This modelling strategy enables us to capture the nuanced differences between forms of civic engagement and assess how various predictors, such as attitudes towards the state, social organizations and social circles, influence the likelihood of belonging to each group.

		No Donation	Donation
Volunteer	Volunteer	Volunteers Only Volunteer but NOT Donate n = 2,097 (12.77%)	Good Citizens Donate AND Volunteer n = 9,363 (57.04%)
	No Volunteer	Non-participants (Bad Citizens) Neither Donate NOR Volunteer n = 1,979 (12.06%) <i>(Reference group)</i>	Donors Only Donate but NOT Volunteer n = 2,977 (18.13%)

Total N = 16,416

Figure 1. Operationalization of dependent variable: citizen types by charitable giving and volunteering.

Inspired by Fei's (1948) classic conception of social relations in China, known as *chaxugeju* and analogously represented as 'concentric circles formed when a stone is thrown into a lake', this study investigates the motivations behind not giving or volunteering at three distinct levels: (1) state level, examining citizens' attitudes towards the state and the CCP; (2) social organization level, exploring citizens' preconceptions about non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and (3) social circle level, considering the influence of citizens' social circles and their perceptions of those who engage in charitable giving and/or volunteering.

At the state level, one of our key operational premises is that the state and the CCP continue to play a crucial role in shaping patterns of philanthropic donations and volunteering in China.

The Party-state has positioned charitable giving and volunteerism as essential elements of what it means to be a good citizen. Given the close linkage of these acts to state orthodoxy, we hypothesize that there will be a relationship between respondents' perceptions of the state and their civic (in)action. We use two questions from the CPCS to capture respondents' attitudes towards the state and the CCP.

- (a) Respondents are asked to rank six options in order of importance in defining a good citizen. Respondents who ranked 'supporting the Communist Party' and 'engaging with China's social problems through volunteerism and charity giving' among their top three responses are coded as 0 (affirmative), while all others are coded as 1. These two items were grouped to capture alignment with dominant civic norms – whether expressed through political loyalty or socially constructive action – both of which are actively promoted in Chinese state discourse as markers of good citizenship.
- (b) Respondents are asked whether they believe the state provides sufficient help to disadvantaged groups ('Do you think the government provides sufficient help to disadvantaged groups?'). Responses are coded as 'yes' = 0 and 'no' = 1. We acknowledge that the wording of this question has a small potential to be interpreted as measuring satisfaction with government service provisions rather than direct support for the government itself.

We expect that respondents who are less supportive of the state are less likely to be influenced by state-centric constructions of good citizenship, consistent with arguments explaining the persistence of non-participants despite active state mobilization efforts. This approach also allows us to interrogate how state legitimacy and ideological alignment shape civic behaviour, particularly in contexts where citizenship is closely tied to political loyalty.

At the social organization level, another strand of literature argues that good citizens seek to address social problems, often through social organizations. Social organizations have played an increasingly prominent role in charitable giving and volunteerism in China, serving as spaces for citizens' voluntaristic activities and often being vocal in soliciting charitable donations (e.g. Teets et al., 2022). Since the enactment of the Charity Law in 2016, social organizations have taken on a more active role in providing social welfare on behalf of the government (e.g. J. Hsu et al., 2017). Given that social organizations are widely associated with good citizenship, we propose that CPCS respondents' attitudes towards these organizations influence their civic (in)action.

- (a) Respondents are asked, 'Do you think that NGOs are required to assist disadvantaged people?' Those who felt NGOs were ineffective/unnecessary in helping disadvantaged people are coded as 1 ('no').
- (b) Respondents are asked to rank the importance of 'good citizens should contribute to society through volunteering and participating in charities'. Those who ranked this lower (4 to 6) are coded as 1, while those who ranked it higher (1 to 3) are coded as 0.

Finally, at the social circle level, citizens' inaction may be explained by the behaviour of others most closely around them (see e.g. Sullivan and Xie, 2009). Social influence theory suggests that individuals may be more likely to donate and/or volunteer when their family, friends, colleagues or classmates do so (see e.g. Lee and Shon, 2023, Wu et al., 2018). Conversely, if those in a citizen's social circle do not donate or volunteer, it is conceivable that the citizen may not feel obligated to participate. The CPCS directly asks respondents, 'Have your relatives or friends participated in volunteer activities or made donations?', with responses coded as 1 for 'no' and 0 for 'yes'.

Additionally, we are interested not only in how the actions of an individual's social circle might impact their decision to donate or volunteer, but how they perceive those engaging in these actions. Specifically, we aim to determine whether bad citizens are more likely to view good citizens as being self-interested rather than altruistic. CPCS asks respondents, 'What do you think is the motivation of most people who volunteer/donate in China?' Both questions include six options, two of which we characterize as being more self-interested. For volunteering, these options are 'to meet the requirements of supervisors or teachers' and 'to look good on their resume'. For charitable donations, the options are 'for tax benefits' and 'to meet the

requirements of supervisors or teachers'. In both cases, if respondents rank either option 1 or option 2 among their top three choices, they are coded as 1 (self-interest). If they rank these options in the bottom three, they are coded as 0.

By incorporating these dimensions, our study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted motivations behind citizens' decisions to engage in or abstain from charitable giving and volunteering. This comprehensive approach allows us to capture the interplay between state influence, organizational perceptions and social circles in shaping civic participation in contemporary China.

Results and analysis

Our analysis examines the distribution of good and bad citizens based on charitable giving and volunteering behaviours. Among respondents, 57% engaged in both activities (good citizens), while approximately 12% participated in neither (bad citizens or non-participants). The remaining engaged in only one form of civic engagement – 18% donated but did not volunteer, while nearly 13% volunteered but did not donate. Table 2 presents the results of a multinomial logistic regression model examining predictors of civic non-participation, defined as individuals who neither donate nor volunteer.

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression of non-participation.

	Neither Donate Nor Volunteer	Donate but Not Volunteer	Volunteer but Not Donate
Female	1.111* (0.0659)	1.094* (0.0537)	0.925 (0.0539)
Age			
18–22	Reference	Reference	Reference
23–29	1.322** (0.158)	1.227** (0.123)	0.937 (0.100)
30–39	1.587*** (0.197)	1.558*** (0.160)	0.732*** (0.0846)
40–49	1.421*** (0.185)	1.280** (0.138)	0.896 (0.107)
50–59	1.432** (0.228)	1.243 (0.166)	0.865 (0.130)
≥60	1.922*** (0.320)	1.224 (0.181)	0.966 (0.161)
Number of Children			
0	Reference	Reference	Reference
1	0.692*** (0.0516)	0.817*** (0.0490)	0.798*** (0.0581)
2	0.659*** (0.0637)	0.545*** (0.0466)	0.670*** (0.0670)
≥3	0.747 (0.166)	0.799 (0.153)	0.479** (0.140)
Resident City			
Beijing	Reference	Reference	Reference
Shanghai	1.021 (0.116)	0.977 (0.0904)	0.954 (0.0954)
Changsha	1.394*** (0.153)	1.508*** (0.135)	1.070 (0.110)
Wuhan	1.197 (0.133)	1.243** (0.113)	0.935 (0.0960)
Kunming	1.481*** (0.162)	1.571*** (0.141)	1.149 (0.118)
Luzhou	1.630*** (0.179)	1.772*** (0.160)	1.297** (0.134)
Others	0.775 (0.175)	0.942 (0.199)	0.611* (0.168)
CCP Member	0.356*** (0.0399)	0.299*** (0.0284)	0.667*** (0.0583)
Attend College/University	0.566*** (0.0364)	0.598*** (0.0322)	0.884* (0.0594)
Monthly Household Income			
0–4,999 Yuan	Reference	Reference	Reference
5,000–9,999 Yuan	0.734*** (0.0789)	0.956 (0.0948)	0.760** (0.0940)
10,000–14,999 Yuan	0.448*** (0.0496)	0.642*** (0.0645)	0.700*** (0.0846)
15,000–19,999 Yuan	0.375***	0.553***	0.502***

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

	Neither Donate Nor Volunteer	Donate but Not Volunteer	Volunteer but Not Donate
	(0.0463)	(0.0604)	(0.0662)
≥20,000 Yuan	0.328*** (0.0408)	0.562*** (0.0609)	0.476*** (0.0625)
Survey Year			
2018	Reference	Reference	Reference
2020	0.362*** (0.0771)	0.565*** (0.110)	0.843 (0.202)
2022	0.367*** (0.0779)	0.478*** (0.0932)	0.858 (0.205)
2024	0.296*** (0.0633)	0.259*** (0.0513)	0.739 (0.178)
Constant	1.110 (0.259)	1.063 (0.228)	0.570** (0.149)
Observations		13,085	
Pseudo R ²		.056	

Standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Chinese Communist Party membership is associated with significantly lower odds of non-participation (0.356, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that CCP members are more likely to engage in civic activities. This aligns with prior research indicating that party affiliation often correlates with higher levels of public service (Zhao and Lilly, 2022). This trend likely reflects party members' awareness of how their actions shape their reputations, reinforced by the strong influence of social circles in encouraging charitable donations and volunteering.

Educational attainment plays a substantial role. Individuals who attended college/university are less likely to be non-participants (0.566, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher education is positively associated with civic engagement. This finding supports the broader literature on education as a driver of social capital and volunteerism.

Income exhibits a similar pattern. Respondents from households earning 20,000 Yuan or more per month are significantly less likely to be non-participants (0.328, $p < 0.001$), reinforcing the link between economic resources and civic involvement.

Individuals beyond the 18–22 age group – particularly working-age and post-college/university adults – tend to participate less in charitable giving and volunteerism. This pattern may reflect competing demands on time, financial constraints or limited exposure to non-profit organizations. However, comparisons among older age cohorts should be interpreted with caution. For example, individuals aged 30–39 show a stronger likelihood of non-participation than those in the 40–49 or 50–59 age groups, suggesting that civic disengagement may peak during early career and family-building years rather than steadily increasing with age.

Women are more likely than men to neither donate nor volunteer or to donate without volunteering. This is somewhat surprising given that women tend to volunteer, globally, at a higher rate than men – though the margin differs across contexts (Einolf, 2010). These disparities are likely an outgrowth of societal expectations, traditional roles and economic conditions of women. The 'triple burden' is particularly strong in China, where women are expected to do unpaid housework, paid labour and childcare (Cherng et al., 2019). This is compounded by the responsibility of families (typically women) to take care of ageing parents, as well. As such, the cultural (and policy) expectations of caregiving likely limits the time and resources for civic activities for women. Notably research in similar cultural contexts in East Asia also finds women are less likely to volunteer than men (Wang and Han, 2023).

Family structure variables also show meaningful associations. The number of children an individual has is positively associated with civic engagement; parents are less likely to be categorized as non-participants. The relationship between parenthood and civic engagement underscores the role of family ties in shaping social involvement. Parents, particularly those with school-aged children, may feel a greater sense of community responsibility, whether through direct participation in local events or indirect contributions to charitable causes. On the other hand, individuals without children may lack these direct connections to community-driven initiatives, making them less inclined to engage in volunteering or donations (see e.g. Caputo, 2010). That said, respondents with more than three children are less likely to volunteer than those with no children, likely because they have less time to give.

Geographic location significantly influences civic engagement, with residents of cities like Changsha, Kunming, and Luzhou being more likely than those in Beijing to neither donate nor volunteer or to donate without volunteering. This suggests that regional differences in economic conditions, cultural norms, local policies and access to non-profit organizations shape individuals' participation in charitable activities. As the capital city, Beijing benefits from a higher concentration of resources, government initiatives and established charitable institutions, which may foster greater civic involvement. In contrast, cities such as Changsha, Kunming, and Luzhou may face different socio-economic pressures or have less developed non-profit sectors, reducing opportunities for donations and volunteering. Residents in these areas may prioritize financial stability over philanthropy, particularly if their disposable income is lower or if civic participation is not deeply embedded in their social identity. Furthermore, variations in local government policies may influence the extent to which individuals feel encouraged to engage in charitable activities.

Next, we explore how Chinese citizens' attitudes towards, and experiences with, three mechanisms (the state, social organizations and their social circles) affect their decision to not engage in charitable giving or to volunteer in Table 3 and the coefficient plot in Figure 2.

Table 3. How do interactions with three mechanisms (state, social organization and social circle) influence the non-participant.

	Neither Donate Nor Volunteer	Donate but Not Volunteer	Volunteer but Not Donate
State Level			
State Does Not Provide Sufficient Help to Disadvantage Groups (1)	1.341*** (0.109)	1.584*** (0.0977)	1.161 (0.0932)
Good Citizens Do Not Need to Support CCP/Government (2)	1.345** (0.137)	1.262** (0.103)	1.067 (0.106)
Combined 1 * 2	0.884 (0.149)	0.787 (0.106)	0.945 (0.165)
Social Organization Level			
NGOs are Not Necessary for Helping Disadvantaged Groups (1)	3.394*** (0.852)	1.700* (0.428)	0.875 (0.312)
Good Citizens Do Not Need to Contribute to NGOs (2)	1.013 (0.0711)	1.050 (0.0565)	1.061 (0.0707)
Combined 1 * 2	0.817 (0.258)	0.542 (0.180)	1.347 (0.570)
Social Circle Level			
No Relatives/Friends Donate (1a)	6.333*** (0.514)	0.962 (0.0789)	9.009*** (0.705)
People Donate Not for Altruism (2a)	0.482*** (0.0669)	0.709*** (0.0548)	0.663*** (0.0769)
Combined 1a * 2a	1.606** (0.296)	0.947 (0.164)	0.988 (0.167)
No Relatives/Friends Volunteer (1b)	2.749*** (0.287)	2.906*** (0.230)	0.871 (0.0958)
People Volunteer Not for Altruism (2b)	1.230* (0.117)	1.050 (0.0685)	1.211* (0.0978)
Combined 1b * 2b	1.009 (0.135)	0.927 (0.100)	1.207 (0.165)

Standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

At the state level, the data suggests that individuals who perceive that the state does not provide sufficient help to disadvantaged groups are more likely to neither donate nor volunteer (coefficient of 1.341) or only donate (1.584). This indicates a lack of trust in the state's ability to support the needy might dissuade citizens from engaging in either activity. Similarly, the belief that good citizens do not need to support the CCP/government positively correlates with non-participation in both activities (1.345) and only donating (1.262), suggesting a detachment from state and governmental expectations reduces civic engagement.

At the social organization level, the perception that NGOs are unnecessary for helping disadvantaged groups significantly increases the likelihood of non-participation (3.394, $p < 0.001$) or only donating but not volunteering (1.700, * $p < 0.05$). While this might suggest that individuals believe alternative structures or personal actions can substitute for social organizations, the data indicate that such beliefs are more closely associated with disengagement than with informal or independent civic action. One possible interpretation

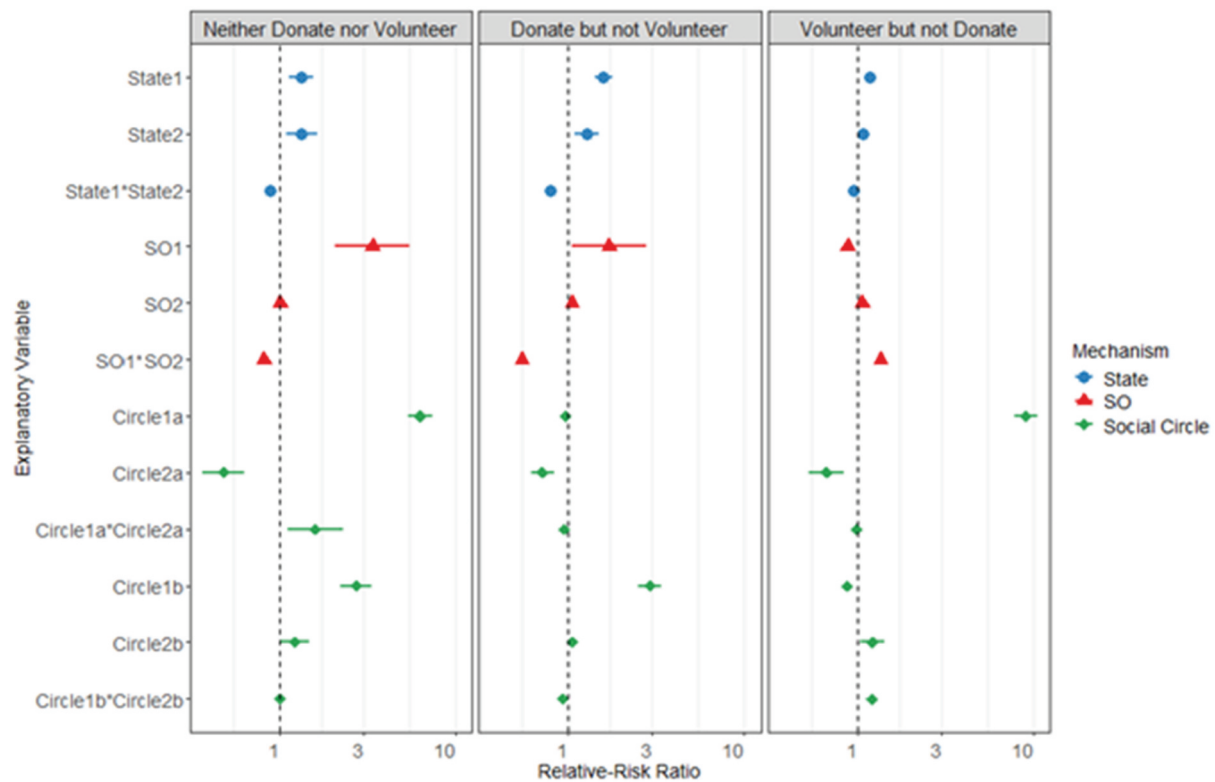


Figure 2. Coefficient plot of the three mechanisms based on mLogit model.

is that this perception reflects a broader scepticism towards organized efforts, leading individuals to either limit their involvement to passive support (e.g. donations) or opt out entirely. In this context, the belief in alternatives may serve less as a motivator for personal initiative and more as a rationale for withdrawing from collective responsibility.

At the social circle level, the absence of relatives or friends who donate significantly increases the likelihood of neither donating nor volunteering (6.333, $p < 0.001$) or only volunteering (9.009, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a strong peer influence. Additionally, the belief that people donate not for altruistic reasons negatively correlates with all three behaviours, suggesting that scepticism towards others' motivations may extend to broader doubts about the value or authenticity of civic engagement itself. Rather than motivating individuals to 'do better' or engage more sincerely, this scepticism appears to foster disengagement – perhaps due to a perception that participation is performative or self-serving. In this sense, those who question others' intentions may also question the legitimacy of the systems and norms surrounding charitable action, leading to lower levels of both volunteering and donating.

Table 4 examines the relationship between respondents' self-reported motivations and their perceptions of others' motivations, revealing significant differences. Specifically, individuals who donated or volunteered for self-interested reasons were more likely to believe that others also acted out of self-interest. The Pearson chi-squared values and corresponding p-values confirm the statistical significance of these findings.

With respect to charitable donations, 97.05% of respondents who donated for altruistic reasons believed others did so for the same reason. In contrast, only 44.70% of those who donated out of self-interest believed others acted altruistically. A similar pattern is observed in volunteering: 87.68% of those who volunteered for altruistic reasons believed others volunteered out of altruism, while 78.80% of volunteers who cited self-interest as their motivation assumed others were also driven by personal gain.

Further analysis in Table 5 explores the constructed beliefs of those who neither donate nor volunteer regarding the altruism of others. The results indicate that non-participants are more sceptical of the motivations behind charitable donations and volunteering. For donations, 25.22% of non-participants believed others donated out of self-interest, compared to 23.17% of good citizens. The disparity is even more pronounced in volunteering, where 32.48% of non-participants viewed others' participation as self-

Table 4. Chi-square test between self-altruism and believing others are altruistic.

Respondent Not Donating for Altruism	Other People Not Donating for Altruism		Total
	0	1	
0	8970 97.05	1122 44.70	10092 85.87
1	273 2.95	1388 55.30	1661 14.13
Total	9243 100.00	2510 100.00	11753 100.00

Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 4.5e+03$; P-Value = 0.000

Respondent Not Volunteering for Altruism	Other People Not Volunteering for Altruism		Total
	0	1	
0	4370 87.68	5103 78.80	9473 82.66
1	614 12.32	1373 21.20	1987 17.34
Total	4984 100.00	6476 100.00	11460 100.00

Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 155.0242$; P-Value = 0.000.

Note: First row has *frequencies* and second row has *column percentages*.

Table 5. Chi-square test between bad citizen and their belief about others' Altruism.

Respondent Does Not Donate	Other People Not Donating for Altruism		Total
	0	1	
0	9956 74.78	2384 76.83	12340 75.17
1	3357 25.22	719 23.17	4076 24.83
Total	13313 100.00	3103 100.00	16416 100.00

Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 5.6375$; P-Value = 0.018

Respondent Does Not Volunteer	Other People Not Volunteering for Altruism		Total
	0	1	
0	4984 67.52	6476 71.68	11460 69.81
1	2397 32.48	2559 28.32	4956 30.19
Total	7381 100.00	9035 100.00	16416 100.00

Pearson $\chi^2(1) = 33.2298$; P-Value = 0.000

Note: First row has *frequencies* and second row has *column percentages*.

interested, compared to 28.32% of good citizens. Chi-squared test results (5.6375 and 33.2298) and corresponding p-values (0.018 and 0.000) confirm the statistical significance of these differences.

Our analysis reveals distinct and asymmetric effects of altruistic versus self-interested attitudes on individuals' decisions to donate or volunteer. Non-participants are more likely to perceive charitable giving and volunteering as driven by self-interest, though this belief is more pronounced for donations. Specifically, 24.64% of bad citizens believe donations are motivated by self-interest, compared to 19.10% of good citizens. The difference is smaller for volunteering, with 44.68% of non-participants attributing volunteerism to self-interest versus 43.76% of good citizens.

In essence, non-participants tend to view donors as acting out of personal gain rather than altruism, and they exhibit even greater scepticism towards volunteers. While 24.64% of non-participants believe donations are primarily self-serving, a much higher percentage – 44.68% – hold the same view about volunteering. Interestingly, this scepticism is not exclusive to non-participants, as good citizens also display some doubt, particularly regarding volunteerism.

One possible explanation for this trend is the growing institutionalization of volunteering in China. Volunteer work is increasingly tied to practical benefits, such as receiving extra credit at universities or improving promotion prospects in the workplace. This integration into daily life may contribute to perceptions that volunteering is often motivated by self-interest rather than genuine altruism. Notably, individuals who donate for altruistic reasons tend to believe that others share the same motivation. A similarly strong pattern emerges in perceptions of volunteerism, where those who volunteer for altruistic reasons assume others do so as well.

Table 6 explores how non-participants perceive the importance of serving China through charitable donations and volunteering. Chi-square test results indicate no significant difference between non-participants and good citizens regarding their views on the importance of donating (Pearson $\chi^2 = 5.2710$, $p = 0.384$). However, the test for volunteering yielded a statistically significant result (Pearson $\chi^2 = 18.8214$, $p = 0.002$), indicating a meaningful difference in how volunteers and non-volunteers perceive its importance. This suggests that while appreciation for charitable donations may be broadly shared across groups, attitudes towards volunteering diverge more sharply. In particular, non-volunteers may view volunteering as less essential to national service, which could help explain their lower engagement levels in this domain.

Implications and conclusion

The findings of this study offer several important implications for policymakers, social organizations, and community leaders aiming to foster greater civic participation among Chinese citizens, particularly in the realms of charitable giving and volunteerism. The data suggests that individuals' perceptions of state support, the role of NGOs, and the behaviour of their social circles significantly influence their likelihood to engage in these activities. Scepticism towards the state's and NGOs' effectiveness, as well as the motivations for charitable actions within social circles, are key factors in determining civic engagement levels.

One of the key insights from the study is that persistent non-participation in philanthropy and volunteerism is not necessarily rooted in a moral failing or deficiency of character. Rather, it appears to stem from a lower degree of natural altruism – a dispositional tendency to prioritize others' welfare. This distinction is important: non-participants may not reject civic engagement out of selfishness or indifference, but simply lack the internalized motivations that typically drive charitable behaviour. Recognizing this helps shift the focus from blame to understanding the psychological and social factors that shape participation.

Moreover, our findings suggest that this feeling of scepticism might not be limited to non-participants. Just because some choose to engage in core civic participation activities, like volunteerism and charitable giving, does not mean they ascribe the kind of meaning to that act we might assume. In essence, the good citizen might only be so on the surface, and at the core is more complicated. As such, thinking of 'good' and 'bad' citizens as opposites could lead us to miss what they crucially share: rising scepticism.

The consequences of these findings are significant. Firstly, if the state wishes to influence non-participants, moralistic and altruistic appeals may not be effective. Instead, influencing the immediate social network of a non-participant is more impactful in changing their behaviour. This approach contrasts with the larger propagandistic campaigns that the Party has utilized since its foundation. Whereas mass campaigns rely on top-down messaging, ideological saturation and broad appeals to conformity, interpersonal influence operates through relational proximity, trust, and behavioural modelling. The latter fosters more authentic and sustained engagement by embedding political participation within everyday social interactions. In this sense, the shift from mass persuasion to localized social influence reflects not only a tactical adjustment but a deeper recognition of how political behaviour is shaped by the micro-dynamics of social life.

Furthermore, the study suggests that even the best policy initiatives may not effectively capture or engage certain demographic profiles. There appears to be a systemic bias that makes some individuals less likely to participate in civic activities like donating and volunteering. This bias could be rooted in socio-economic factors, geographic location, or social networks, disproportionately affecting certain groups – not to mention cultural norms and expectations. Recognizing and addressing these systemic biases is crucial for creating a more equitable and effective strategy for civic engagement. Without such considerations, efforts

Table 6. Chi-square test between bad citizens and how important it is for a citizen to serve China by donating and volunteering.

		Good Citizens Should Contribute to Society Through Donating and Volunteering						
Respondent Does Not Donate		most important					least important	Total
		2	3	4	5			
0		2229	1807	3035	2444		1804	12340
		75.66	76.57	74.30	74.67		75.58	75.17
1		717	553	1050	829		583	4076
		24.34	23.43	25.70	25.33		24.42	24.83
Total		2946	2360	4085	3273		2387	16416
		100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00
Pearson $\chi^2(5) = 5.2710$; P-Value = 0.384								
		Good Citizens Should Contribute to Society Through Donating and volunteering						
Respondent Does Not Volunteer		most important					least important	Total
		2	3	4	5			
0		2066	1644	2824	2219		1740	11460
		70.13	69.66	69.13	67.80		72.89	69.81
1		880	716	1261	1054		647	4956
		29.87	30.34	30.87	32.20		27.11	30.19
Total		2946	2360	4085	3273		2387	16416
		100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00		100.00	100.00
Pearson $\chi^2(5) = 18.8214$; P-Value = 0.002								

Note: First row has frequencies and second row has column percentages.

to cultivate a sense of civic duty and participation may continue to fall short, leaving certain segments of the population disenfranchised and disconnected from broader societal goals.

Fostering civic engagement in China requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the diverse motivations and barriers faced by citizens. Building trust in state institutions, enhancing the visibility and impact of NGOs, leveraging social networks, and creating opportunities for authentic and independent engagement are essential strategies for promoting charitable giving and volunteerism. Understanding the unique characteristics and motivations of sceptical citizens can help tailor interventions that resonate with their needs and encourage their participation in social causes. By adopting targeted and inclusive approaches, policymakers and community leaders can work towards creating a more engaged and socially responsible citizenry. Moreover, as younger generations increasingly embrace civic activities, there is an opportunity to foster a long-term cultural shift towards greater civic participation. This requires sustained efforts to integrate civic engagement into education, support grassroots initiatives, and provide platforms for youth leadership. Ultimately, a collaborative and inclusive approach involving government, NGOs, social organizations, and community leaders is key to achieving the vision of a more engaged and vibrant civil society in China.

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