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Hybridization of Chinese international development volunteering: Evidence from three state-funded programmes

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Abstract

Motivation: In the field of international development assistance, China has been undergoing a transition from being a receiving to a sending country. In addition to growing its foreign aid budget, China has been making great efforts to send volunteers to serve overseas. To date, however, there has been relatively little research on the expansion of China's international development volunteering (IDV) actions.

Purpose: This exploratory study examines the characteristics of IDV programmes initiated and funded by the Chinese government. Specifically, we investigate how various IDV mechanisms have been developed to incorporate specific actors, and analyse how these arrangements serve the sponsors' interests.

Approach and methods: We use a qualitative case-study approach and conduct in-depth analyses on three influential state-funded IDV programmes. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews and secondary documentary materials.

Findings: Research findings from three Chinese IDV programmes indicate that the hybridization dynamics of IDV are reflected in their different programme mechanisms, whereby intra-, non- and extra-state actors from international, central and local levels are connected as contributors. Volunteer resources are transformed, through different mechanisms, into development resources to benefit the hosting countries, and into public diplomacy resources, technical resources, and human capital for the sponsors' own interests.

Policy implications: This study highlights the hybrid nature of state-funded IDV practices and shows the evolution of Chinese IDV from traditional official-to-official linkages to more diverse and spontaneous forms involving different non-state actors.

KEYWORDS

China, international development volunteering, public diplomacy

1 | INTRODUCTION

China is a newcomer to the world of international development volunteering (IDV), but in the last two decades has shown increasing interest in promoting IDV as a new approach to expanding its international engagement and co-operation. Within a short period of time, China has transformed from a volunteer-receiving country into a volunteer-sending country (Brassard et al., 2010). The first milestone of this development was the launch of China's first official IDV programme—China Youth Volunteer Overseas (CYVOs)—in 2002. From 2002 to 2015, this programme sent 650 young Chinese volunteers to serve in 22 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Yang, 2015). Under the China–Africa co-operation framework, this programme sent more than 300 volunteers to Africa from 2006 to 2009 (MOFCOM, 2009). The second milestone was the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The BRI guidance document, *Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century maritime Silk Road*, states that volunteer services should be promoted for strengthening people-to-people bonds, in order to win public support for deepening bilateral and multilateral co-operation (NDRC et al., 2016). Thereafter, the Chinese government funded IDV programmes as a way to build, maintain and strengthen people-to-people exchanges that can contribute to public diplomacy (Lin & Lin, 2017).

The development of Chinese IDV has mirrored the state's efforts to support international volunteering activities, both financially and institutionally, although Chinese practices have not yet received much academic attention. One of the fundamental reasons for this is that IDV is a relatively recent development in China. While a few studies pay attention to Chinese volunteering actions in specific continental regions (in Africa, for example), these explorations are mostly concerned with the impact of IDV actions on local communities in the host countries (Brautigam, 2011; Ceccagno & Graziani, 2016; Hsu et al., 2016; Rotberg, 2008). Other literature, although mostly written in Chinese, has discussed the implications of IDV for China as the sending country (Jiang, 2008; Wang, 2017; Zhang & Qi, 2018). How exactly the Chinese government promotes and carries out IDV for achieving different objectives remains unexamined. We address this research gap by focusing on the processes and characteristics of different Chinese IDV programmes at the organizational level, and by examining the diverse mechanisms through which resources and actors interact as contributors.

The extant literature, based mostly on Western practices, has widely discussed different characteristics of international volunteering activities (Lough & Xiang, 2016; McBride & Lough, 2010; Sherraden et al., 2006) and examined how they might influence outcomes (Lough & Tiessen, 2018; Sherraden et al., 2008). In particular, some studies with a specific focus on government-funded IDV activities have discussed how state sponsors design IDV as a policy tool to serve their national and foreign policy goals (Hjort & Beswick, 2020; Magu, 2018; Schech, 2017). Grounded in these previous insights, this study attempts to capture the dynamic characteristics of Chinese IDV by examining three influential IDV programmes that were financially supported by the state, but implemented by different agencies in diverse forms. Despite the central role of the state in the promotion of IDV, we propose that the state-dominated IDV framework has been evolving from a traditional singular structure into a more integrated network involving multiple resources and actors from both state and non-state sectors. Ultimately, however, the diverse and spontaneous forms of IDV still serve the state's diverse goals.

This study seeks to contribute to IDV research in several ways. First, it presents the diverse practices of Chinese IDV, filling the research gap left by previous empirical observations on global practices of IDV, which have been almost entirely based on evidence collected mainly from traditional donor countries. Second, it aims to bolster the current scarcity of multi-case studies on IDV; existing studies focus on the bigger picture of global IDV practices, on the overall features of IDV in specific countries, or provide a micro view of volunteers' motivations, experiences, and impacts. While

managing volunteering has been acknowledged as a challenge (Brudney, 2005), research on different IDV mechanisms developed in the same country has rarely been conducted. Drawing on the case study of three IDV programmes initiated and funded by the Chinese government, we intend to capture the varying mechanisms whereby multiple actors are connected to contribute in different ways. Third, we study IDV from a meso-level perspective, adding to the existing literature on the various characteristics and diverse outcomes of IDV. Fourth, our study contributes to practice by providing practitioners, including state sponsors, domestic and international volunteer involving organizations (VIOs), volunteers, and host countries or agencies, with an understanding of the hybrid nature of Chinese IDV for more effective engagement in the future.

This article is organized as follows. We start by reviewing the existing literature on IDV, then narrow the focus to the more specific context of China, explaining how and why the Chinese evidence contributes to IDV research. After rationalizing research methods, case selection, and data collection, we explore the varying characteristics of IDV by unpacking the process of each programme and examining its individual dynamics. In the subsequent discussion section, we analyse how volunteer resources are transformed into development resources that benefit the recipient countries, and then into public diplomacy resources, technical resources and human capital that serve the state's interest through the dynamic mechanism of IDV. Finally, the article concludes with the study's implications for future development of IDV in China and some perspectives for future studies.

2 | STATE-SPONSORED IDV, ITS HYBRIDIZATION DYNAMICS AND THE CHINESE CONTEXT

IDV is a hybrid concept: by sending individuals and groups to serve overseas without asking for financial gain, IDV is essentially a volunteering activity; it is also an integral part of the global development industry, providing technical support and human resources for countries in need of development assistance (Devereux, 2008; Smith & Laurie, 2011). At the same time, it is usually incorporated into the sponsoring states' public diplomacy efforts (Rieffel & Zalud, 2006; Schech et al., 2015). This study focuses on the state-funded IDV activities that have been significantly promoted by government resources, primarily from the traditional donor countries since the end of the Second World War.

Most well-known government-sponsored IDV programmes carry out similar activities—namely, sending skilled volunteers to serve abroad—but they are designed and delivered in various forms. For example, the US government created its official IDV programme, the Peace Corps, in 1961. This programme is fully sponsored by the federal government and directly conducted by the Peace Corps as a US federal government agency. With direct support from the federal government, the Peace Corps has become one of the world's most influential IDV programmes, having sent more than 240,000 volunteers to 142 countries since its inception (Peace Corps, n.d.). In 1965, the Japanese government copied the Peace Corps model and initiated the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCVs) programme, which is managed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)—a government agency affiliated with the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). The JOCVs also achieved large-scale deployment, sending more than 40,000 Japanese youth to provide technical assistance to nearly 90 countries around the world (JICA, 2019). Other countries, such as the UK and Australia, promote IDV by sponsoring competent non-profit organizations. For instance, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID)—which from September 2020 merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)—has sponsored Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), one of the most significant international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the UK, to carry out the International Citizen Service

(ICS) programme and the Volunteer for Development (VfD) programme. Similarly, the Australian government sponsors the Australian Volunteers Program, which is managed by Australian Volunteers International (AVI), a Melbourne-based NGO. It is also common for high-income countries to fund IDV programmes led by international organizations. For example, both Japan and Korea have funded United Nations Volunteers (UNV) assignments that sent university students to serve in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The global expansion of state-funded IDV actions has attracted considerable academic interest. A large body of literature is concerned with the various motivations and objectives of state sponsors in funding IDV programmes. First and foremost, IDV is a tool of development assistance, through which donor countries can transfer technologies, skills and knowledge to aid-receiving countries for achieving local development goals (Georgeou & Engel, 2011). More academic attention has, however, been paid to the national objectives of volunteer-sending countries, of which the most frequently considered is the role of IDV programmes in building people-to-people connections that are conducive to the donor countries' public diplomacy (Castells, 2008; Lee, 2018a, 2018b; Madeley, 2011; Schech, 2017; Schech et al., 2015). The traditional donor countries have a long-term practice of incorporating IDV programmes into their public diplomacy strategies. For example, one of the main goals of the Peace Corps is promoting understanding of US citizens among people in the LMICs to which volunteers are assigned (Rieffel, 2003). By sending volunteers to serve in the host countries for a relatively long period of time, IDV plays a clear role in communicating the sending-countries' culture, political values and foreign policy to the host countries' residents, which in turn benefits the sending countries' foreign relations (Caprara et al., 2007; Lough, 2011; Quigley & Rieffel, 2008; Rieffel & Zalud, 2006). In addition to the public diplomacy goals, the sending countries benefit from the personal development of individual volunteers, especially the young adults, who obtain international experiences and promote their professional and personal growth through volunteering, which will eventually contribute to developing the human capital of the sending country (Campbell & Warner, 2016; Holmes et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2005; Sherraden et al., 2006).

The diverse practices of IDV, as well as the multiple objectives behind them, have important implications for our understanding of IDV in China; that is, when different forms of IDV are developed and co-exist conterminously in one regime, they may serve myriad state purposes. In order to capture the diverse forms of IDV programmes in China, we ground our analysis on insights from the existing literature, focusing on meso-level characteristics such as the origins of programmes, their sources of funding, types of programme implementers, fields of service, the duration of placements, the size of volunteer groups, the requirements of volunteers, the consideration of recipient countries and the types of host agencies (Campbell & Warner, 2015; Devereux, 2008; Lough & Tiessen, 2018; Sherraden et al., 2006, 2008). We are concerned with the dynamic structures and processes through which these multiple actors (sponsors, programme implementers, volunteers and host agencies) work together. The primary question we hope to answer is how the conflation of the various characteristics discerned in IDV practices can serve the diverse purposes of the state donors.

To address this question, we interpret IDV as a hybrid layout, in which actors from different levels and sectors are connected through distinct but overlapping institutional domains and structures to serve diverse objectives. In this layout, the state donors retain the central role, designing and guiding IDV programmes, and at the same time allowing different entities to work in relative unison. In this way, the notion of hybridity used to describe IDV in the present context refers to a state-orchestrated but open-ended framework that calls for a pluralist rethinking of the Chinese IDV as a co-constitution of different forms of volunteering practices, carried out by heterogeneous actors who are knitted together by networked, multi-scalar processes of institutional coupling to reflect a combination of various objectives. Chinese practices of IDV provide valuable insight into understanding the hybrid

TABLE 1 Basic information about the three programmes

Programmes	Established	Main contents	Number of Volunteers	Host countries	Duration of placements	Sponsors	Implementers	Status
CYVOs	2002	Deploying Chinese young volunteers to the target countries working in the fields of health, language teaching, agriculture support, and IT support, etc.	More than 700	Around 20 countries, including Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guyana, Laos, Mauritius, Myanmar and Seychelles	6–12 months	MOFCOM	Local CYLs ECSs of the Chinese Embassies	In progress
CFPA	2016	Deploying Chinese young volunteers to the target countries working in the fields of health, language teaching, community construction, and IT support, etc.	10	Nepal Myanmar	6 months	MOFCOM	CFPA BVSF	Completed
BVSF–UNV	2016	Deploying Chinese young volunteers to serve in UNV field units or other UN agencies on projects that are related to youth and sustainable development.	6	Thailand Myanmar Cambodia Kenya	6–7 months	Beijing CYL	BVSF UNV	Completed

nature of IDV: on the one hand, as an authoritarian country, China provides a unique example of state-orchestrated development of IDV; on the other hand, different state-funded IDV programmes have been conducted contemporaneously and conterminously, which can provide a comparative context for understanding the variations.

The development of IDV in China is promoted by the state. As early as 1963, the Chinese government sent its first volunteer group to Algeria to provide medical aid, even though this early action was not yet of international concern (NHC, 2019). The first official international volunteer programme, the CYVOs, was created by the Communist Youth League of China (hereafter, CYL), a party-led agency guiding the activities of youth, in 2002, as a youth volunteering activity aimed at providing university graduates with international experience and improving their capacity for international engagement (Huang, 2017). Three years later, the central government decided to integrate this programme into the national Official Development Assistance (ODA) framework. Chinese volunteers have been assigned with the mission of not only providing technical assistance to the host countries but also playing a grassroots ambassador role connecting the publics between China and the host countries (Wang, 2020; Wang et al., 2012). In recent years, with an intention to engage in the international community and participate in global governance following international norms, China has also started trying to involve non-state actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs) and international institutes in its IDV activities (Huang et al., 2014).

These two short decades have seen the exploratory development of IDV in China which has been constructed as a policy tool to serve the country's diverse objectives. Compared to the IDV programmes funded and implemented by the traditional volunteer-sending countries, however, the Chinese IDV practices are much smaller in terms of the number of deployed volunteers, the number of target countries, and the resulting global influence. Nevertheless, observing China's increasingly proactive IDV practice, especially when the whole world has been seeing a general retrenchment of foreign aid, helps shed light on the changing dynamics of IDV in general. In addition, examining the characteristics of IDV programmes initiated by China—a middle-income country as well as a potential regional hegemon—can help contribute to the existing literature on international volunteering, which is currently based on evidence collected primarily from the wealthy, traditional donor countries.

3 | METHODS, CASE SELECTION AND DATA

As an exploratory study, this article uses qualitative research methods, such as document studies and in-depth interviews, to obtain insights into the characteristics and processes of the different IDV programmes created by the Chinese government. We select three influential IDV programmes. They are all government-funded programmes, but operate under different structures.

The first is the CYVOs programme, which was initiated by the central CYL in 2002 as a youth volunteering programme and then incorporated into the ODA framework in 2005. It is now directed and sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and implemented by local CYLs and the Economic and Commercial Sections (ECSs) of the Chinese embassies in recipient countries with technical support from the central CYL and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). The second programme was initiated and funded by the MOFCOM as a new trial for IDV in 2016. A Beijing-based charity, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), was appointed to carry out this programme independently, with technical support from a local state-affiliated volunteer-involved organization (VIO), Beijing Volunteer Service Federation (BVSF). The last programme was initiated and funded by the Beijing CYL and co-delivered by BVSF and UNV in 2016. The basic information about three programmes is showed in Table 1.

Data were collected from documents and interviews. The documentary materials include government policies, financial statistics, work reports, research publications, meeting notes and media news. These documents were obtained online or requested during the fieldwork. We also conducted 14 in-depth interviews from 2019 to 2020, including three key government officials who were engaged in managing the three programmes, five programme co-ordinators involved in programme implementation, and six volunteers returning from their placements (two from each programme). Government officials were mainly asked to introduce the background, purposes, and management processes of each programme, and also to explain how they made decisions on and worked with programme implementers. Programme co-ordinators provided more detailed information about the implementation process of each programme, particularly in regard to how they managed relationships with different actors. Volunteers were invited to share details about their experiences of being international volunteers in their respective programmes. We were also invited to attend some programme meetings and events, which allowed us to collect more information.

4 | CASE ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

4.1 | Case 1: The CYVOs programme

The CYVOs was the first official IDV programme. As stated earlier, it was initially introduced by the central CYL as a youth volunteer programme in 2002 and then incorporated into the national ODA framework by the central government in 2005. As such, the programme has been through two distinct phases.

In the first three years, the central CYL designed and guided the programme. Specifically, the central CYL assigned the local CYLs in Shanghai and Shenzhen, China's two international coastal cities, to directly recruit, deploy and manage volunteers. During these three years, 63 Chinese young volunteers were sent to Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. It is notable that the central CYL obtained limited sponsorship from a private enterprise, without receiving any special funds from the central government. As a result, volunteers had a monthly stipend of only USD 100.

The CYL-initiated international volunteering programme, despite its small scale, drew the attention of the central government. With its increasing global influence, China was eager to show its great power responsibility by participating in global development assistance actions (Woods, 2008). Thus, the central government decided to incorporate the youth volunteer programme into the national ODA framework. Consequently, the MOFCOM—the central government agency in charge of foreign aid—became the leading organization responsible for designing related policies, making annual deployment and budget plans, and providing programme funds. The MOFA plays a co-ordinating role in communicating with the target host countries. In particular, the ECSs of the Chinese embassies in host countries are responsible for maintaining relationships with local government agencies and providing on-site support to volunteers during their placements. The central CYL retains the role of guiding programme implementation by distributing the tasks of volunteer recruitment and management to local CYLs. From 2006 to 2009, there were 15 local CYLs engaged as direct programme implementers. Since 2010, however, only Shanghai, Chongqing, Guangzhou, Guizhou and Jiangsu have continued to carry out this programme. Each province or city is paired to one country suggested by the MOFCOM (Shanghai–Laos, Chongqing–Mauritius, Guangzhou–Seychelles, Guizhou–Myanmar, Jiangsu–Guyana), which can not only save implementation costs but also maintain stable friendships with the host countries.

Target countries and the scale of deployment vary according to the overall plan of the central government. For instance, from 2006 to 2009 the CYVOs reached a peak of 300 volunteers sent to around 20 countries, primarily in Africa. This occurred against a political backdrop of the then President Hu Jintao making a promise on the first Forum on China–Africa Cooperation Summit in 2006 that the Chinese government would send 300 volunteers to Africa within the next three years (MOFCOM, 2009). The government fulfilled its promise, then scaled back to a smaller, but stable, deployment, sending around 50 to 60 volunteers per year to five countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America since 2010.

The service areas provided by CYVOs are based the recipient countries' requirements. The main areas include medical care, language teaching, IT support, agricultural technical support and arts training. The MOFCOM, with the assistance of the ECSs of the relevant Chinese embassies, collects host countries' requirements before making annual plans and assigning specific tasks to local CYLs through the central CYL. The local CYLs are responsible for recruiting, training, deploying and managing volunteers. Usually, local CYLs recruit volunteers from local public-sector agencies and universities. There are some basic requirements for volunteers, including age, personal character, education background, language qualifications, professional skills and health. State recruiters also place great value on applicants' national loyalty and responsibility, as a local CYL official in charge of the CYVOs programme explained:

Each of their words and actions represents the country, so we prefer the volunteers who work for the public sector or who are university student leaders. It is easier for us to manage them (personal communication, December 2019).

Volunteers need to undergo intensive training organized by the local CYLs before being deployed overseas. The MOFCOM has basic requirements on the content of the pre-deployment training, covering language learning, local culture, safety and security, diplomacy knowledge and team building.

After volunteers arrive in the host countries, the ECSs of the Chinese embassies are responsible for providing orientation for volunteers commencing their work. Volunteers are placed in various positions, though most commonly in government agencies. The host agencies are required to provide accommodation and transport services to the volunteers. Financially, all expenses, including international travelling, visa fees, health inspection fees, basic living allowances and insurance, are covered by the MOFCOM, with each volunteer receiving around USD 300 as a monthly living allowance. The duration of placements, depending on the annual plans made by the MOFCOM, ranges from six months to one year. During this time the local ECSs conduct on-site monitoring, communicating with both the host agencies and the volunteers. Meanwhile, volunteers are required to make regular briefings on their work, in writing, for the sending agencies (the local CYLs) in China. The comments from the local ECSs, alongside the submitted briefing materials, are used as important references when the central CYL conducts performance evaluations after volunteers return from their placements. The results of performance evaluation are reported to the MOFCOM and to the organizations with which the volunteers were originally affiliated.

4.2 | Case 2: The CFPA programme

The CFPA programme was initiated by the MOFCOM in 2016 as a new approach to foreign aid. It marked the first instance of an NGO being incorporated into the national ODA framework to independently carry out an IDV programme. The CPFA—a Beijing-based NGO devoted to alleviating

domestic and international poverty—was chosen as the programme implementer, alongside technical support from BVSF.

The CFPA was selected because of its international engagement capacity. As one of the most influential charities in China, the CFPA has conducted several international development programmes. Its programmes have supported the economic empowerment of women, occupational support for youths, and free food for children, operating primarily in African and Asian countries, such as Cambodia, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Nepal and Uganda. More importantly, the CFPA has two offices in Myanmar and Nepal, which has been a great advantage in managing volunteers overseas. Thus, the CFPA was believed to be the NGO best suited to conducting this programme. However, given that the CFPA lacked adequate experience in managing volunteers, the MOFCOM sought co-operation with BVSF to provide technical support.

Unlike the top-down administrative duties of the local CYLs and the ECSs in the CYVOs programme, the CFPA as an external agent was granted great autonomy to make decisions regarding recipient countries, service areas, host agencies and volunteer positions. Myanmar and Nepal were chosen as recipient countries because they were already home to the CFPA's overseas offices. The MOFCOM as sponsor endorsed this decision because of the importance of Myanmar and Nepal as China's neighbours and partner countries. In the preparatory stage, the CFPA's two overseas offices played a critical role in negotiating with local partners, collecting their demands, and providing recommendation lists to the programme office in Beijing. The programme office deployed an expert group to both countries to make on-site appraisals of recommended host agencies and positions. They determined five positions in Myanmar, including two IT assistants in a university, two mechanical engineers in an industrial training centre, and one programme assistant in the CFPA's overseas office, and five positions in Nepal, including an IT assistant and a physical therapist in an NGO providing care for people with disabilities, two community programme assistants, and one Chinese teacher in a local welfare-related NGO. The length of each position was planned as 12 months.

Volunteer recruitment and training were co-organized by the CFPA and BVSF. BVSF was invited to support the programme as an implementation partner because of its experience in volunteer management. It was also a good opportunity for BVSF to expand its impact on the development of IDV, and at the same time to exchange ideas with the CFPA regarding its own IDV programme (Case 3). The CFPA programme lifted the age restriction from under 35 to under 65, and its applicants were not necessarily picked from the public sector or universities. Among the over 200 applications received, mainly from university students or new graduates, while a few worked for private companies or were in the midst of a career break. There were no applicants from the public sector. In addition to basic requirements, such as education background, language skills and health, this programme paid more attention to volunteers' professional skills and their abilities to adapt to a changing environment. This is because, on the one hand, the positions provided by the host agencies required very specific skills; on the other hand, the living conditions during placements were relatively harsh.

The CFPA organized the pre-departure training together with BVSF, meaning that the volunteers recruited by two different IDV programmes attended the same training. The one-week intensive training included a series of workshops on both theoretical and practical knowledge regarding international development and volunteering, foreign policies, diplomatic protocol, local culture and emergency responses. Compared to the CYVOs programme, the training was more concerned with volunteers' understanding of volunteerism and local culture. For instance, some international students from the host countries who studied in Beijing were invited to the training, helping volunteers to learn about local culture in a more direct way.

After volunteers arrived in Myanmar and Nepal, the CFPA's overseas offices organized orientation to help volunteers settle down and start their work. Volunteers were provided free accommodation,

living with the CPFA staff working at the overseas offices, and were offered a USD 900 monthly living allowance to cover other daily expenses. The two overseas offices were responsible for conducting on-site volunteer management, providing direct and regular communication with volunteers, and general support to address their needs. The programme office in Beijing provided other technical support, such as organizing online counselling services, arranging international travelling and helping with visa documents.

Volunteers returned to China after around six-months' service. The duration of service was shorter than initially planned because of the visa restrictions. It is important to note that this programme has since been suspended due to many problems being identified during the first deployment. In the words of a programme co-ordinator:

Seemingly, it was the visa problem and also some volunteers complained about the living allowances. Actually, it shows that the support from the MOFCOM, in terms of both policies and funds, was insufficient. It is understandable that the MOFCOM wanted to give us autonomy to carry out this programme, but it does not mean that the government can leave everything behind ... a top-level institutional design is very necessary if the state sponsor wants to continue this pattern. Additionally, this programme also shows that we still lack the experience of managing international volunteering activities (personal communication, February 2020).

4.3 | Case 3: The BVSF–UNV programme

The last programme was initiated and funded by a local government agency—the Beijing CYL. Specifically, the Beijing CYL fully funded BVSF and UNV to co-deliver this programme. BVSF is a government-organized VIO that plays a central role in promoting and developing volunteerism in Beijing; UNV is a UN entity that recruits and deploys volunteer specialists for development projects in LMICs. The co-operation between BVSF and UNV goes back to 2007 and experienced three phases through the implementation of three different projects: Strengthening Volunteerism for Development through the 2008 Beijing Olympics Games (2007–2011), Strengthening Voluntary Service Development through Civic Participation and Regional and International Cooperation (2012–2015), and Strengthening China's Involvement in the Development of International Volunteer Service through South-South Co-operation and the Belt and Road Initiative (2016–2019). The IDV programme was the main component of the third project.

Different from the previous two programmes in the national ODA framework, this programme was aimed at providing an opportunity for young Chinese volunteers and VIOs to participate in international development work, particularly through working with the UN system. As China's capital city, and as the pioneer in developing volunteerism at the local level, Beijing wanted to play a leading role in promoting the development of Chinese international volunteering. For UNV, participating in this programme was an important step toward engaging middle-income countries in international development work and for showcasing an evidence base for the development of volunteerism in them.

In order to run this programme effectively, a BVSF Project Management Office was set up and tasked with co-ordinating the day-to-day programme implementation. This office was headed by the Deputy Secretary General of BVSF, who was also appointed as the programme manager responsible for managing operations and resources in consultation with UNV. Specifically, UNV deployed two national UN volunteers to work in the Project Management Office with the BVSF staff. Thus, both BVSF and UNV were directly engaged in the day-to-day programme implementation.

The target countries and volunteer positions were determined through several rounds of negotiation between BVSF and UNV. Under the BRI framework, BVSF proposed its preferences for target countries in Asia and Africa. Then, UNV collected the position vacancy information through the UN human resource management system and provided the available positions for BVSF to make decisions. From 2017 to 2019, six volunteers were deployed to work in the UNV Asia and the Pacific Office, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Hub in Thailand, the UNV Field Office in Myanmar, the UNV Field Office in Cambodia and the UN-Habitat headquarters in Kenya. They served in diverse fields, including innovation and knowledge management, community reconstruction, disaster relief, IT support and youth development.

Volunteers were mainly recruited from the Beijing CYL, universities and partner VIOs in Beijing, which means that this programme targeted CYL officials, university teachers and students and leading volunteering practitioners. Applicants' capacity for international engagement, volunteering experience and language skills were the basic selection criteria, with the selection committee particularly valuing applicants' career plan focus. A programme co-ordinator who participated in the selection process explained:

We had only six positions, so we had to find the most suitable volunteers through very strict assessment and selection ... We preferred the applicants who had a plan or at least had the passion to devote themselves to international development and volunteering in the near future (personal communication, February 2020).

Selected volunteers needed to attend a week of intensive training. The training in the first year was co-delivered by BVSF and CFPA, and in the following two years was organized by BVSF. Interestingly, BVSF organized these training workshops to include not only the volunteers who were going to start their work overseas, but also university students in Beijing who were interested in international volunteering and development. A public official from the Beijing CYL who was in charge of this programme explained:

Our university students did not have enough awareness, knowledge and experience of global engagement and this programme was a very good opportunity for volunteers to work with the UN system. Unfortunately, we had only six positions at the early stage, so we needed to find a way to expand the impact of this programme on more young people (personal communication, February 2020).

The host agencies provided detailed instruction on their work by organizing on-site training after the volunteers arrived. During the assignments, which usually take from six to seven months, the host agencies directly managed volunteers based on the existing human resource management system. BVSF and UNV provided technical and financial support. In particular, the Project Management Office in Beijing was responsible for conducting regular communication with volunteers to check their well-being, arranging on-site visits for each volunteer during placements. Volunteers received Settling-In-Grants after arriving at the designated duty stations and then received monthly living allowances of around USD 2,000 from UNV, which was fully funded by the Beijing CYL. They were also provided with medical insurance and security support, much like other UN staff and volunteers. Different from the previous two programmes, which sent several volunteers to one place and provided them with free accommodation and transport services, the BVSF–UNV programme deployed only one volunteer to each location at a time, and volunteers needed to find accommodation and arrange daily transport by themselves.

As volunteers were working directly for local UN agencies, their day-to-day performance was evaluated and recorded by the host agencies. In addition, they were required to submit monthly plans,

briefings, and attendance records to BVSF, which was also responsible for conducting the mid-term and end-of-term performance evaluations.

The three cases show the hybrid nature of China’s IDV practices. Actors from different levels and sectors are involved through distinct but overlapping institutional domains and structures. As mentioned in the methodology section, we intend to understand the dynamics of IDV through examination of their various characteristics from a meso-level perspective. We summarize the different forms of IDV based on how the key actors—state sponsors, programme implementers, volunteers and host agencies—were connected through different mechanisms (see Figure 1).

There are two state sponsors: the MOFCOM at the central level, and the Beijing CYL at the local level. The MOFCOM, as the central government agency in charge of China’s foreign aid portfolio, funded the CYVOs programme and the CFPA programme, and incorporated both into the national ODA framework. The Beijing CYL, as a local government agency responsible for managing and developing volunteerism, funded the BVSF–UNV programme as an integrated component of its volunteerism development schemes. The two state sponsors arranged the programme implementation through different mechanisms. The MOFCOM designed and guided the CYVOs programme within the existing bureaucratic machinery, handing over the related obligations to local and overseas government agencies with support from the central CYL and the MOFA. To strengthen people-to-people connections, the MOFCOM then outsourced a new IDV programme to an NGO, CFPA, which implemented the programme with technical support from experienced VIOs at both the central and local levels. The Beijing CYL established a collaborative partnership with UNV, through which the sponsor-affiliated VIO, BVSF, and UNV designed and implemented the IDV programme together. At this point, the hybrid feature of Chinese IDV has been shown; that is, intra-, non- and extra-state actors from international, central and local levels are engaged in the IDV activities through different state-orchestrated mechanisms.

Moreover, volunteers in the CYVOs programme were mainly recruited from public-sector agencies (including public universities). They were required to strictly follow the state’s guidance. Different from the CYVOs programme, volunteers in the CFPA programme did not need to report to any officials or government agencies during their placements. The volunteers in the UNV programme were required to perform their assignments following the UN agencies’ standards and guidance and at

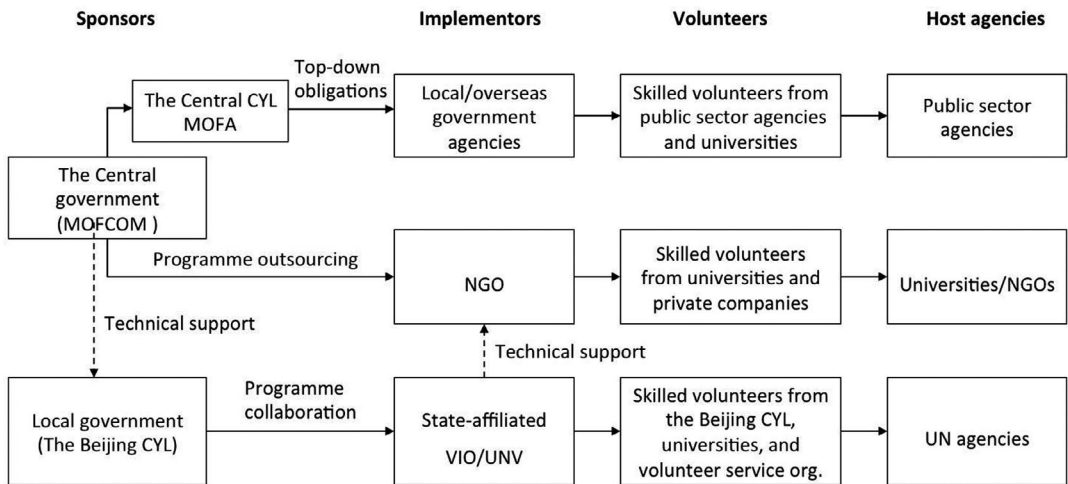


FIGURE 1 The hybridization dynamics of IDV practices in China
Source: the authors

the same time they were expected to continue to work in fields of volunteering and international development after returning from their placements. The services these volunteers provided were all related to development, including but not limited to technical support, language teaching, health care and agricultural support, but the host agencies differed in each case. In the CYVOs programme, the host agencies were public-sector organizations in the recipient countries. Usually, the ECSs of the Chinese embassies in the recipient countries would maintain the relationship with the local government agencies that were in charge of co-ordinating aid resources, while the local government agencies would allocate volunteers to different public-sector organizations in need. The CFPA contacted the host agencies, including local NGOs and universities, through its overseas programme offices. In the BVSF–UNV programme, the host agencies were different UN-affiliated organizations.

5 | DISCUSSION

The existing literature on international volunteering activities focuses on examining various characteristics and their potential influence (Lough & Tiessen, 2018; Sherraden et al., 2006, 2008). Adding to these insights and drawing on a multi-case study, we introduce the Chinese practice of IDV, focusing on its hybrid characteristics and examining different programme implementation mechanisms whereby multiple resources and integrating actors are connected. In order to understand the dynamics, we focus on the state sponsors' objectives and how each programme served the sponsors' objectives.

The different programme mechanisms summarized from the three cases indicate that the state's motives in promoting IDV are multifaceted: it attempts to transform volunteer resources into development resources to benefit host countries at one level, while at another level, development resources are transformed into public diplomacy resources, technical resources, and human capital to benefit the donor state itself. This article used the notion of hybridization to describe four aspects of IDV in China. The first pertains to the structure of IDV programmes, characterizing a state-orchestrated but open-ended, pluralist and multi-level framework constructed by heterogeneous actors who are connected by transnational networks. The second aspect refers to the transformative capacity of Chinese IDV's hybrid layout, manifested as a resource transformation matrix, in which development resources play a mediating role in transforming volunteer resources into public diplomacy resources, technical resources, and human capital for the state sponsors' own purposes. Third, the notion of hybridization is also used to describe the CYLs' resemblance to other different programmes, which provides the programme identity mobility in the IDV sphere. For example, the CYLs' experimental operation of IDV realized the practical value of the experiences and knowledge of subsequent programmes, such as BVSF–UNV. By learning from BVSF–UNV, the Party-orchestrated IDV programme was able to better adapt to the rules of international civil society. Fourth, hybridization also refers to state attempts to diversify the manner in which it engages in international civil society and volunteering practices.

These diverse efforts can be thought of as a development platform on which China can test and weigh the consequences of different innovations, hoping to eventually optimize its operation of international volunteering projects without destabilizing the state political system. However, the actual operation of the IDV programmes in China has been uneven, considering that the IDV led by NGOs is now defunct and that the UNV IDV involves very small numbers of volunteers, leaving only the large state-based programme that has been operating since 2002.

From the cases discussed, this uneven hybridity in China's IDV programmes indicates an order of structural preference. Within the diverse and hybridized forms of IDV in China, there is a structural preference for the unified and formalized Party system composed of countable elements (e.g. local branches of the Communist Youth League of China) that stipulate a hierarchical relationship. Through

this unity, the local CYLs traverse space to stay connected to localized elements in recipient countries. Within the Party networks, complex hierarchies of co-option have been established to translate the political impulses of a centrally placed actor (the Party-state) into reality on the ground. The CYVOs programme (Case 1) thus resonates state impulses, with official-to-official channels ensuring that each component of the system works in unison to reflect the state's goals.

Moreover, diversity within the Chinese IDV system is encouraged as long as it can increase the adaptive and transformative capacity of China's engagement in foreign activities: CSOs collaborating with the government are usually allowed a degree of freedom and independence if: (1) the CSOs can better cope with local situations in the recipient countries and help improve China's global reputation; and (2) they can help transform development, public diplomacy, technical and human resources to benefit both donor and recipient states. More complicated relationships occur when the Chinese government reaches the limit of its provision of specific goods and services through official communication. In cases 2 and 3, when the government's goals converged with the goals of the international CSOs, the government tended to rely on CSOs to solve the problems or use their expertise to provide the necessary services: their relationship is complementary. However, the goals of international CSOs can also diverge from the Chinese government's, meaning that the initial relationship is usually only temporarily co-operative, and often short-lived. This is an implicit effort to prevent temporarily co-operative relationships from transforming into potential competition.

In spite of this complicated relationship, providing development assistance to the countries in need remains the primary goal of most IDV programmes. By sending skilled volunteers to the host countries and providing the necessary technical support, IDV has been developed to complement other forms of development assistance, such as donation, investments and paid technical experts (Schech, 2017). The three programmes, despite following different paths, were grounded in fundamentally contributing to social and economic development in LMICs. The CYVOs programme, by virtue of its relatively sizeable and long-term deployment, contributed more to the development of host communities than the other two programmes that were still in an exploratory stage and on a small scale. The general contribution of Chinese volunteers to achieving development goals is very limited, however, compared to contributions made by volunteers from the traditional donor countries: more than 235,000 US volunteers have been sent to serve in 141 countries through the Peace Corps and more than 40,000 Japanese volunteers have been deployed to nearly 90 countries by the JOCVs (JICA, 2019; Peace Corps, 2019).

Compared to the achievement of development goals, China as the sponsor state was more concerned with IDV's public diplomacy role, but the three programmes reflect different approaches to transferring volunteer resources into public diplomacy resources. In the CYVOs programme, volunteers were recruited and managed by the state authorities in China and overseas and expected to play a grassroots ambassador role in contributing to the friendship between China and the partner countries. For example, this programme has sent 106 Chinese volunteers to Laos since 2002, and has become a symbol of the friendship between China and Laos, with the state leaders from both countries having spoken highly of its contribution to their bilateral connections (Shanghai Volunteer, 2019). Despite the stable friendship with partner countries, the effectiveness of this programme in promoting mutual awareness and understanding, especially among the public, has been questioned. For example, a research team conducted a survey among the African students who studied in Beijing in order to understand the effectiveness of the CYVOs programme in achieving public diplomacy goals. The results showed that Chinese volunteers impressed these students less than the volunteers from other countries, such as Japan, the UK and the US, and that too much state intervention was one of the main reasons underlying these results (Wang et al., 2012). In most Western volunteer-sending countries, IDV programmes have purposely weakened the state's intervention and even separate volunteering

activities from diplomacy activities in order to minimize the tension between the goals of development and public diplomacy (Madeley, 2011).

The state sponsor has recognized the weakness of the traditional IDV, especially under the BRI framework that has high expectations on people-to-people connections. Therefore, the Chinese government has started trying alternative approaches through involving NGOs and international organizations as programme implementers. In Case 2, volunteers were recruited and managed by a Chinese international NGO and worked with local civil society, which was believed to be an effective way to promote civic-to-civic exchanges. In Case 3, through working with the UN agencies in the host countries, volunteers obtained more opportunities to communicate with local NGOs and community leaders. Nevertheless, the two new programmes achieved limited success in achieving public diplomacy goals, due to relatively short periods of volunteering, the low numbers of volunteers and only reaching a handful of host countries; public diplomacy itself requires a long-term effort and widespread influence (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). By contrast, the Western volunteer-sending countries have achieved large-scale and sustained deployment. However, it is worth noting that China, as a new volunteer-sending country, tries to distinguish itself from the traditional volunteer-sending countries by requiring its IDV programmes and volunteers, in line with China's other ODA activities, to keep a low profile in terms of their political and cultural identities (Huang, 2017).

In addition to achieving development and public diplomacy goals, China has an urgent need to improve its VIOs' and volunteers' global engagement capacity. Chinese VIOs, including most NGOs, and volunteers, when compared to those of traditional donor countries and even some "Global South" countries such as India and South Africa, play a less active role in global governance, largely due to challenges such as a lack of international experience and knowledge (Huang et al., 2014). Therefore, the state sponsors support IDV in exchange for technical resources and human capital. Through collaboration with UNV, the Beijing-based VIO has obtained precious experience of international volunteering management from the well-developed system, and then shared the experience with other Chinese VIOs and NGOs through conferences or training workshops. At the same time, volunteers who were provided the opportunity to work within the UN system were expected to continue working in the fields of international development and volunteerism after returning from their placements. For example, a volunteer, after returning from the placement in Thailand, was assigned to a new position in the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, working on the global recruitment of Games volunteers. It is worth noting that the CYVOs programme and the CPFA programme also share the mission of improving international engagement capacity of Chinese VIOs and youth, but that this goal takes a back seat to the mission of strengthening public diplomacy.

In a nutshell, China has constructed IDV into a hybrid formulation, through which the state sponsors intend to transform volunteer resources into development resources, public diplomacy resources, technical resources and human capital for different purposes. To some extent, the three state-funded IDV programmes have respectively contributed to achieving these objectives, but they reflect different focuses. The CYVOs programme, by virtue of its relatively large-scale and sustained deployment, played a dominant role in providing development support, and in doing so contributed to strengthening bilateral relationships between China and the partner countries. The CPFA programme was introduced to facilitate direct people-to-people exchanges that were underemphasized in the CYVOs programme, and was considered an experiment in exploring the ways in which Chinese NGOs engaged with IDV activities. The BVSF-UNV programme, by partnering with the UN system and organizing experience-sharing and training aimed at broader VIOs and youth, focused more on skill learning and talent development.

6 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our discussion engages in the debate on IDV by moving beyond the empirical straitjacket of identifying various characteristics and diverse outcomes. Adding to these insights, we recast the Chinese IDV practices into three situated, interrelated and hybrid modes. By signposting more open-ended and ambivalent conceptions behind IDV, this article maps the motives of the Chinese IDV, and in doing so adds pluralism to our understanding of IDV operation not only in Western democracies, but also in a (semi-)authoritarian context. The article offers a point of departure for appreciating the co-existence and mutual constitution of the different motives behind, and forms of, the Chinese IDV, and suggests ways to understand their implications and realities through a grounded comparative analysis of variegated forms of IDV practices.

Notably, the hybrid structures and practices of Chinese IDV must be enmeshed in a context where the Chinese political system is seen as an evolving, contested and “hybrid” regime that, although authoritarian in character, contains multiple and often competing non-state organizations, leading to a decentralized, multi-channel process of international engagement (for “hybrid” regime, see He & Warren, 2011; Lee & Zhang, 2013; Lieberthal & Lampton, 2018). Specifically, through the lens of institutional pluralism, the Chinese IDV either works through a state-orchestrated network, or relies on NGOs that operate as autonomous units that effectively connect foreign localities without significant state oversight, often in exchange for de facto financial support from Beijing. In the Chinese IDV framework, the state remains the central actor which, on the one hand, consolidates the associations between subnational, partisan, non-state and international actors; and, on the other hand, the decentralized IDV network allows different entities to work in relative unison, thereby enabling Beijing to “act at a distance” while tying foreign localities together within its “globalized” network and establishing relationships between different actors and places to ensure the effectiveness of resource transformation.

In face of the post-pandemic global pushback against China’s international engagement, in future practice, and especially under the BRI framework, the Chinese government may reduce state control over IDV activities while promoting people-to-people exchanges. Thus, built upon the established hybrid IDV framework, the state sponsors should provide more resources to support the engagement of NGOs and international organizations in IDV activities, which might be conducive to adjusting China’s “min-max” approach to international participation, seeking to minimize obligations while maximizing self-interest or increasing its reputational payoff (Reilly, 2012). To achieve this goal, the central government needs to introduce a top-level design as the institutional foundation for the involvement of non-state actors. Last but not least, enterprises may play an increasingly important part in IDV activities, as many overseas Chinese enterprises have been meeting their social responsibilities in local communities through volunteering (Chen et al., 2010).

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