**Title:** The Biased Good Will – An Exploratory Analysis of the Donation Distributive Patterns of Online Crowdsourcing Platforms in China

**Introduction**

Scholars across disciplines have observed the rising trend in China where online platforms and social media are becoming a major form of social connection and organization, driven by Internet technology and tech giants like Tencent, Alibaba, and ByteDance. While scholars have examined the influence of platforms from various perspectives, such as the labor rights under the platform economy, the social media political participation, and the surveillance and control of online platforms, little attention has been paid to how the introduction of platforms and social media has changed the philanthropic sector.

As summarized by Han et al., (2023), digital philanthropy is a relatively recent phenomenon.  It originated when tech giants like Tencent and Alibaba set up corporate foundations and utilized their technologies to create crowdsourcing platforms for NGOs to mobilize public resources for their projects. This new form of charity fundraising was recognized and regulated by the Chinese government as well. Following the promulgation of the New Charity Law in 2016, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began to allow philanthropic foundations to fundraise on online public charitable platforms and announced a list of approved platforms. Before that, only a limited number of registered NGOs that gained approval from the Ministry of Civil Affairs were allowed to start public fundraising campaigns, which was part of the state regulation to control potential movements and civil activities. According to data from Han et al. (2023), projects seeking online financial support have surged since 2013 to include more than 5,000 projects in one year.

The limited literature that examines online crowdsourcing in China emphasizes its policy implications and interactions with the local state (Han et al., 2023; Tsai & Wang, 2019).  While providing valuable insights on how grassroots NGOs manage the pressure from both the state and the platform, seeking to enlarge their influence both financially and politically, these studies were limited to a selected sample and cases, leaving the overall trend and patterns under-investigated.

To address this gap, my project will focus on China’s online philanthropic crowdsourcing projects and conduct an exploratory empirical investigation on the patterns and characteristics of donations through online platforms, namely how various factors influence the amount one project can raise. Besides identifying patterns of donations with empirical evidence, which could be helpful for both scholars and practitioners, this research could potentially examine to what extent GONGOs are holding the financial resources as some scholars predict and indicate the agenda-setting function of GONGOs.

Therefore, my project raised the following research questions:

Do donations on Tencent’s Online Crowdsourcing platforms to be biased towards geography and topics?

How are these patterns related to NGO background?

What are some potential explanations for the preference toward certain areas and topics? And most importantly, what’s the implication of internet crowdsourcing changing the relationship between NGOs and the markets?

To narrow down the focus area and collect comparable data, this project will focus on projects related to women. Compared to other projects like environmental ones, those that target women can combine various topics and issues, from female health, and women's education, to gender equality advocacy. This variety allows my research to analyze how donations are biased towards different projects, and how organizations of different backgrounds show preferences for project types.

This research will focus on the online fundraising platform operated by Tencent for two reasons. Firstly, Tencent was one of the first and largest donation platforms with a good reputation and had attracted 29 billion RMB donations from the public to support more than one hundred thousand projects. Secondly, the data accessibility for research purposes is more complete on the Tencent Philanthropy Platform. While the data source might be biased, this research is confident that the trend observed can reflect the broad situation in China.

**Literature Review**

***State Corporatism***

As summarized by Spires, Schmitter developed the concept of “state corporatism” as a system in which “singular, non-competitive, hierarchically ordered representative ‘corporations’ . . . were created by and kept as auxiliary and dependent organs of the state” (Schmitter 1974, pp. 102–3). After the neo-liberal turn and observation of the fact that service-provision and welfare programs share a rising proportion of activities scholars argued that NGOs and how authoritarian states attempt to fend off political challenges and control society through restrictions on and oversight of citizens’ associations (Schmitter, 1974; Spires, 2011). Non-state sectors take the responsibility for social welfare and caring of citizens, sometimes even involved in social development. Therefore, NGOs as civil society shift from a public sphere for civic political participation to an instrument to provide social welfare, and accordingly, be integrated into the state regime and weaken its political power both in formulating democratic proposals representative of the public and the bargaining process.

***Critics of Civil Society Marketization***

﻿ The rise of giant corporations out of the economic liberalization is actively shaping the non-profit sector as well. While acknowledging their financial contribution, many scholars hold a critical view that they could further harm the autonomy of Chinese civil associations (Lai & Spires, 2021). They argue that the introduction of market logic leads to an excessive emphasis on the donation amount and scope of the organizations, instead of their implication in bonding the civil sphere. By contrast, more optimistic perspectives exist and believe that while this criticism may hold in a liberal context, marketization brings about autonomy, transparency, and accountability in China as an authoritarian state (Yu & Chen, 2018).

***Government-Organized NGO in China***

Early scholars tend to use the civil society framework to analyze the philanthropic center, especially those who see potential in philanthropic donation to leverage civil participation and even democratization in China (Chamberlain, 1993; Jie, 2006; Moore, 2001; Tang & Zhan, 2008). Yet scholars soon realized that the NGO as the third sector in China demonstrates completely different characteristics, featuring a more collaborative instead of conflictual relationship with the state (Chamberlain, 1998; Muthiah Alagappa, 2004). The most prominent case would be the identification of Government-Organized Organizations, or GONGO (Saich, 2000). These organizations are not part of the government structure and operate in an independent system, yet they could be directly founded by the state and in close relationship with the government (Lai et al., 2015). For instance, the All-Women China Federation is a typical GONGO that provides social welfare service on behalf of the state and promote the state rhetoric.

**Methodology**

This paper uses computational text analysis with R programming to analyze an original dataset scraped from the Tencent online platform. Based on grounded theory and a manual review framework, I first classify the projects by their issue of focus, then visualize the data to show how China’s online charity donations vary across different characteristics.

***Data Collection & Initial Processing***

﻿*Data collection*

I built an original database through Webscraper, a web scraping tool that allowed me to scrape data from the Tencent online philanthropy website. To focus on women-focused projects, I used the built-in search engine with the keywords “妇女” (women) and “女性” (female) and retrieved the results. For each project posted on the platform (Figure 1) available for public donation, I collected their project names, short introductions, target amounts, NGO organizers, start times and end times of the campaigns, the detailed project descriptions with promotion texts, and most importantly the total amounts raised for each project.

*Geographical Information*

Besides the variables collected from the website directly, this project identifies the location and administration level of these organizations. This information could be helpful to analyze if donations are biased towards certain areas. In our dataset, almost all NGOs are affiliated with a place. We observe that NGOs are in four different administration levels, namely national, provincial, city-level, and county-level. Based on the organization name and matching it to the map of China, we extract the location and administration level of each project, the data projected to link geographical information available from R packages.

*Types of NGOs*

Through analyzing the organization name, I applied automated allocation to identify GONGOs and civil NGOs. This method is plausible as only organizations registered and recognized by the Ministry of Civil Affairs are allowed to use China in their name. Similar rules apply to the All-Women China Federation, where only those affiliated with it are allowed to use certain text in their names.

*Data Cleaning*

Based on the raw database, I conduct data cleaning to remove the noise that is not women-focused programs. The final database has 2126 data entries in total, and the sample size is believed to be large enough to reveal the biased patterns.

*Topic Identification*

Based on the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), I first reviewed a sample of the whole dataset to extract six topic areas that these projects may cover, namely health, mental health, career, disability, women’s rights, and women empowerment. These six topic areas are based on both project descriptions and extracted after reviewing dozens of NGO annual reports. For each topic area, I developed a lexicon of keywords to allocate projects into topics for further analysis (List A, Appendix).

**Findings and Discussion - The Biased Distribution of Donation**

***Strong Skewness of Donation***

Based on the topics identified in the previous section, I plotted that bar chart (Figure 2) of donation amount by topics and found that projects on women-health received the highest donation, followed by women empowerment and career. In comparison, the projects focus on mental health, disabled women, and promote women's rights and gender equality account for only a small proportion.

By printing the quantile of the donation amount (Figure 3), it could be found that the distribution of donations raised through online platforms is quite skewed. While the highest 10% of projects received millions, roughly 60% of the projects raised less than ¥45,000, and 80% falls under ¥200,000. For further analysis below, I divide them into low, high, and extreme high groups based on the amount of donation.

The box plot in Figure 4 presents a further visualization of the distribution of log donation by topics, indicating similar skewness could be observed for all topic areas.

***Biased Donation Amount of GONGOs and NGOs***

Figure 5 exhibits the amount of donations of GONGOs and civil NGOs. The donations to GONGOs are mostly composed of extremely large amounts of donations. This finding may indicate that GONGOs, while operating on online platforms, still rely on large donors based on their existing resources.

Figure 6 shows how donations towards GONGOs and NGOs are distributed across topic areas. Surprisingly, GONGO receives more donations to conduct projects on rights-based advocacy.

Topics that receive relatively less attention generally, like mental health and disability, are mainly conducted by NGOs. This is aligned with the idea in third-sector research that NGOs are more innovative in their solutions and focus on addressing social welfare issues, while the government took a relatively conservative approach (Toepler & Abramson, 2021).

***Geographical Imbalanced Donation***

Figure 7 and Figure 8 maps the donation amount of province-level projects and city-level project, separately. Interesting findings could be extracted while comparing them to the GDP by province (Figure 9). Firstly, it is aligned with the intuition that at the province level, regions with lower GDPs generally receives more donation, and vice versa. By contrast, however, the city-level donation indicates the opposite conclusion. Apart from the donation that flows to central impoverished cities, a large proportion of donation flows to cities around the Yangtze River Delta and Pearl River Delta, the two regions with almost the highest GDP in China. One possible explanation for this controversy is the affinity to the birthplace of donors, where financially capable people prefer to donate to their birthplace or they have a connection with, instead of the place in more urgent need. While these findings haven’t been captured by literature on Chinese philanthropy yet, the argument is not new in philanthropic literature (Bachke et al., 2014; Havens et al., 2006).

Finally, this research finds that different provinces exhibit significant preferences towards topic areas. First and most prominently, almost all donations to rights-based projects and gender equality flow to Beijing. This could possibly be explained by the tightened control on rights-based advocacy for NGOs. As a result, only those NGOs closely monitored by and have deep connections with the government, mostly located in Beijing, are allowed to conduct rights-based programs. Another finding is that all provinces are mostly composed of health, career, and women empowerment programs. Sichuan, Tianjin, and Jiangsu are the only three where a considerable amount of donation flows to mental health issues, showing a relatively innovative trend.

**Limitation:**

I am well aware that this project has a major limitation in that it didn’t include qualitative evidence like in-depth interviews or case studies to validate the potential mechanisms and explanations I raised. The lexicon I used, while based on both manual review and literature, could still bear certain misallocation, and accordingly affect the final results. Despite these limitations, this project provides exploratory findings which could be the grounds for further research to explain the theorized patterns identified here.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper conducts an exploratory analysis of how the donation of Tencent’s online crowdsourcing platform in China on women-related projects is biased. How do donors favor certain regions, and topics, and explore potential explanations. The result exhibits some original innovative findings of distribution patterns of public crowdsourcing and proposes a potential explanation. Further qualitative research like in-depth interviews and case studies may seek to validate these explanations.

**References**

**﻿**

Bachke, M. E., Alfnes, F., & Wik, M. (2014). Eliciting Donor Preferences. *Voluntas*, *25*(2). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-012-9347-0

Chamberlain, H. B. (1993). On the Search for Civil Society in China. *Modern China*, *19*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/009770049301900206

Chamberlain, H. B. (1998). Civil Society with Chinese Characteristics? Civil Society in China . Timothy Brook , B. Michael Frolic . *The China Journal*, *39*. https://doi.org/10.2307/2667694

Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, *13*(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00988593

Han, L., Lee, C., & Song, Q. (2023). From Crowdfunding to Crowd Mobilization: The Impact of Digital Philanthropy on Grassroots Organizations and Local Politics in China. *The China Quarterly*, 1–19. https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/S0305741023001662

Havens, J. J., O’Herlihy, M. A., & Schervish, P. G. (2006). Charitable giving: How much, by whom, to what, and how? In *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153439-026

Jie, C. (2006). The NGO Community in China Expanding Linkages With Transnational Civil Society and Their Democratic Implications. *China Perspectives*, *68*(december 2006).

Lai, W., & Spires, A. J. (2021). Marketization and Its Discontents: Unveiling the Impacts of Foundation-led Venture Philanthropy on Grassroots NGOs in China. *China Quarterly*, *245*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741020000193

Lai, W., Zhu, J., Tao, L., & Spires, A. J. (2015). Bounded by the State: Government Priorities and the Development of Private Philanthropic Foundations in China. In *China Quarterly* (Vol. 224). https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574101500123X

Moore, R. R. (2001). China’s fledgling civil society: A force for democratization? *World Policy Journal*, *18*(1). https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-2001-2006

Muthiah Alagappa. (2004). Civil Society and Political Change in Asia: Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space. *Perspectives on Politics*, *03*.

Saich, T. (2000). Negotiating the state: The development of social organizations in China. *China Quarterly*, *161*. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0305741000003969

Schmitter, P. C. (1974). Still the Century of Corporatism? *The Review of Politics*, *36*(1). https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500022178

Spires, A. J. (2011). Contingent symbiosis and civil society in an authoritarian state: Understanding the survival of China’s grassroots NGOs. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(1). https://doi.org/10.1086/660741

Tang, S. Y., & Zhan, X. (2008). Civic environmental NGOs, civil society, and democratisation in China. *Journal of Development Studies*, *44*(3). https://doi.org/10.1080/00220380701848541

Toepler, S., & Abramson, A. (2021). Government/Foundation Relations: A Conceptual Framework and Evidence from the U.S. Federal Government’s Partnership Efforts. *Voluntas*, *32*(2). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00331-z

Tsai, K. S., & Wang, Q. (2019). Charitable Crowdfunding in China: An Emergent Channel for Setting Policy Agendas? *China Quarterly*, *240*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574101800139X

Yu, J., & Chen, K. (2018). Does Nonprofit Marketization Facilitate or Inhibit the Development of Civil Society? A Comparative Study of China and the USA. *Voluntas*, *29*(5). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-018-9952-7

**Appendix**

A screenshot of a computer screen

Description automatically generated

Figure 1 A sample page

A graph with different colored squares

Description automatically generated

Figure 2

A close-up of numbers

Description automatically generated

Figure 3 Quantile of Donation

A black and green lines

Description automatically generated

Figure 4

A graph of a number of different types of blood type

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 5

**A graph of different colored squares

Description automatically generated**

Figure 6

***A map of china with different colored areas

Description automatically generated***

Figure 7

A map of china with different colored areas

Description automatically generated

Figure 8

***A map of china with different colored areas

Description automatically generated***

Figure 9 GDP in 2021 by province

**A graph of different colored squares

Description automatically generated**

Figure 10

**List A, Lexicon for topic identification**

dict\_health <- c("健康","病","乳腺","癌","医","患","疾","治疗","瘤")

dict\_mental <- c("心理","抑郁","精神","情绪","减压","自闭")

dict\_career <- c("就业","渔","创业","培训","技能","职场","收入","增收","孵化","企业","创收")

dict\_disable <- c("障碍","残障","聋","哑","盲","听障")

dict\_rights <- c("性侵","暴力","家暴","权利","权益","法律","安全")

dict\_empowerment <- c("赋能","发展","领导力","独立","自立","自强","互助","力量","社群","社区","赋权")