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PUBLIC INTEREST AND SENSEMAKING:

HOW SOCIAL ACTIVISTS MAKE SENSE OF THEIR ENGAGEMENT

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Public Interest and Sensemaking:

How Social Activists Make Sense of their Engagement

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Certificate of Originality

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Olivier Ruelle

To my father.

Raymond Ruelle (1934-2017)

Abstract:

There were 699,000 registered social organizations in China at the end of 2016. The motivations of volunteers active in these organizations and in millions of unregistered associations have been addressed by a number of scholars. The motivations of full-time practitioners, however, remain poorly understood. This dissertation addresses this question by adopting a social constructivist approach. It applies the concept of sensemaking, borrowed from organizational studies, to understand how individuals working in social organizations make sense of their engagement. Taking cues from individual narratives, it explores the reasons they offer to explain their engagement, how their involvement contributes to shaping their identities, and which ideal-type values lie at the hearts of their belief systems. As these values and the motivations driving their participation encounter legitimation issues and other trying realities, individuals deploy various strategies to make sense of these challenges. These sensemaking strategies have a direct impact on the whole sector and its development.

Two main arguments are advanced in this dissertation. First, sensemaking provides a solid foundation to understand individuals' motivations for working in social organizations. Second, the concept of public interest (*gongyi*), firmly grounded in the participants' own perspectives, reflects their motivations--and the realities in which social organizations operate in China today--more adequately than terms such as "charity" or "philanthropy." Ultimately, this dissertation proposes an alternative to the civil society framework to better understand the context in which social organizations and their members operate in China today.

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I warmly thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. David K. Herold. Completing this thesis would not have been possible without his help.

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Chapter 1 The Rise of gongyi in China

Throughout these pages, I use the term "public interest organizations" (PIOs) to describe entities that are usually called "nongovernmental organizations" (NGOs) or "civil society organizations" (CSOs) in the civil society literature, and "public interest practitioners" (PIPs) to refer to individuals active in these entities, instead of NGO or charity workers. I also avoid the use of the term "third sector," because I doubt it is adapted to China's situation and environment, preferring instead "PI sector." I suggest that the term PIPs should include volunteers, professional practitioners working in PIOs, and individuals who work in social enterprises (SEs) pursuing objectives of a public interest nature.

The term *gongyi*, is used on its own as a generic term to describe the sector or activity that is most commonly translated as charity, non-profit, or non-governmental in the English language, but for which I have preferred the literal translation public interest (PI) throughout this thesis. Many of the individuals I interviewed said that they were "doing PI" (*zuo gongyi*), regularly referring to themselves or their peers as PI "persons" or "people" (*gongyi ren*). They sometimes used the expression PI "personage", "figure," or "public figure" (*gongyi renshi*) to mention individuals whose names are easily recognized in the sector. The more formal term PI 'practitioner' or PIP (*gongyi congyezhe* or *gongyi congye renyuan*), which I have adopted for this thesis, was only occasionally used among participants during all our interactions and exchanges.

Participants often referred to the PI 'field' or 'domain' (*lingyu*) when speaking about PI in a more abstract way, while they used 'circle' (*quan* and *jie*) when discussing PI as a domain populated with colleagues, friends and peers. The term *quan* is reminiscent of Fei Xiaotong's 'differential mode of association' (*chaxugeju*) and one of the images he evoked to explain his theory.

> … it [the pattern of China's social structure] is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places. (Fei, 1992, pp. 62-63; cited by Bruckermann & Feuchtwang, 2016, p. 28)

Occasional references to the expression 'PI atmosphere' (*gongyi fenwei*) were made in relation to how favorable the (local, regional, national, sectorial) environment was to practice the PI 'profession' (*zhiye*). A majority of PIPs saw PI as an 'industry,' or rather a 'sector' (*hangye*), one that was in a process of development. While less used than the term *hangye*, there were regular references to the concept of a 'cause' or an 'undertaking' (*shiye*), in the sense of an objective to be pursued, especially a 'career.'

My interest in PIPs stems from an academic project undertaken in 2011-12 for my master's thesis. In this chapter, I first review the evolution of the PI sector in recent years. Then I present two significant actions that marked the year 2011 and the beginning of my interest for the PI sector, analyzing the features of these internet-facilitated actions. Then I present the factors that led me to shift my research interests from the initiatives themselves to the individuals who work in the PI sector. I conclude with the problems still faced by the sector today, why it is important to study PIPs' motivations, and how this could lead to a better understanding of the whole sector.

1.1 A growing sector

The development of the PI sector in China is a recent phenomenon. In 1988, there were 4,446 registered social organizations[1]. This number more than doubled over the next ten years[2] (Spires, 2014, p. 65). By the end of December 2016, more than 699,000 non-profit organizations (NPOs), or social organizations (*shehui zuzhi*), had been registered in China through the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA). Among those, 359,000 had registered under the status of private non-enterprise units (*minban fei qiye danwei*)[3] and close to 3,800 as private non-public fundraising foundations (Dong, 2017, p. 2), which can be considered the type of social organizations most independent of governmental influence. This status does not amount to total independence, but it means that

[1] Most of the literature refers to what I call public interest organizations (PIOs) in this thesis as nonprofit organizations (NPOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to qualify what the MCA understands as being social organizations (*shehui zuzhi*).
[2] I could not find recent official statistics or evaluations from other sources regarding the number of persons being employed by this type of social organizations in the last few years.
[3] In 2016, the government changed the official name of private non-commercial enterprises in social service organizations (*shehui fuwu jigou*). This appellation does not seem to have been widely adopted by either practitioners or scholars since its introduction.

the creation, management, and objectives of such organizations possess a higher degree of autonomy from the government than social associations (SAs) (*shehui tuanti*) and public foundations. “In contrast to SAs and public foundations, which are often established in a top-down fashion by the state, particularly in the early market transition period, the majority of NPOs and private foundations are usually initiated in a bottom-up manner by ordinary citizens, the middle class, and the wealthy” (Han, 2016, p. 28). There were over 161,000 private non-enterprise units employing over 1.5 million full-time staff at the end of 2006 (Zhao, 2008, p. 101).

1.1.1 Growing number of volunteers

Another growth trend related to the PI sector is seen in the number of volunteers. Over a hundred million persons took part in volunteering activities in China in 2015 (Yang, 2016). China had close to 72.6 million registered volunteers at the end of 2016 and over 62.2 million who had not registered. The total number of volunteers was almost 135 million, or 9.75% of China’s population. Among both registered and unregistered volunteers, 58 million individuals were reported to actively participate in volunteering activities covering 18 major areas, including support of elderly, handicapped, and poor people, community work, etc. These volunteers were active through more than 1,161,000 organizations (Yang, 2017).

1.1.2 Donations on the rise

Overall donations to the PI sector grew by 10.7% in 2016 (Yang, 2017), another way to measure the continuous growth of that field in recent years. 9.9 Public Interest Day[4], a three-day event created by an alliance of Tencent, hundreds of NPOs, corporations and celebrities (Baidu Encyclopedia), aims to engage individuals in donating to PI projects. Launched in 2015, the second and third editions saw a substantial increase in the number of participants and the money they donated. According to Tencent, the first edition generated donations of less than RMB 128 million with an aggregated number of over two million participants. The 2017 edition saw those numbers rise to almost 830 million and 12.68 million, respectively. Such increase has been celebrated by some Chinese

[4] Thus called because it takes place on 9 September and the two preceding days.

media as heralding the opening of an era in which the whole people can be involved in charity (Li, 2017). Tencent has done its (self-interested) part in promoting these ideas. For example, one of its founders, Tencent Charity Foundation sponsor and honorary chairman Chen Yidan, stresses the numerous contributions of the event. He claims that 9.9 PI Day has resulted in greater transparency and accountability thanks to disclosure of information, has resulted in easier popular access to PI participation, and has contributed to the creation of new standards for the whole sector (Chen, 3 Sept. 2017).

The figures provided above illustrate the swift development of the PI sector in recent years. 2008 is often highlighted as a key moment, with unprecedented numbers of volunteers participating in the relief efforts of the Wenchuan earthquake and helping in the organization of the Olympic Games. 2011 can be suggested as a milestone in the evolution of the PI sector because it demonstrated what PI actions might achieve with the combination of charismatic leaders, internet technologies, and higher public participation.

1.2 2011: a special year

In 2011, public figures such as academics and investigative journalists launched actions through the social network service (SNS) *Weibo* (microblog) in China that caught public attention and initiated public discussions. Some of these actions dealt with social issues such as the abduction and trafficking of children, miners befallen by pneumoconiosis, or malnutrition of schoolchildren in poor regions. These discussions were initiated on Sina's microblog platform *Weibo*, but traditional media quickly followed suit, sometimes even seeming to result in the central authorities taking initiatives to deal with these matters (Shi, 2012). One such initiative was the decision by then-Premier Wen Jiabao, on October 26, 2011, during a State Council executive meeting, to launch a nutrition improvement plan for rural compulsory education students in 680 counties and cities. The plan allocated three yuan per student per day, providing a meal allowance to about 26 million students (Ye, 2014; Shi, 2012).

1.2.1 2011: Weibo actions that "changed" China

These *Weibo*-initiated actions also caught my attention. I had just gone back to university and two of these initiatives became the topic of my master's thesis. International media, including the BBC (Hewitt, 2012) and *The Atlantic*, (Gao, H., 2012) as well as some scholars (e.g. Tong & Lei, 2013; Teng & Mosher, 2012; Wu, Atkin, Lau, Lin, & Mou, 2013), were under the spell of what can best be described as the *Weibo* craze. So was I, believing in the power of SNS to increase political participation and launch social movements. I assumed that topics being discussed online by Chinese internet users had the potential to find their way into the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government policy makers. Western scholars of public policy and agenda setting such as Kingdon had stated that processes underlying these phenomena were still badly understood and hard to clarify in countries such as the United States (Kingdon, 1995). I believed that the growing importance of SNS provided an opportunity to shed some light on that issue in China. Wang Shaoguang's model of popular pressure (Wang, 2006, 2008) seemed to provide a good foundation to explain how popular opinion expressed online could find its way into China's opaque agenda-setting mechanisms. Following the trend, my thesis revolved around two cases.

1.2.1.1 Two initiatives, one core issue

Take a Photo to Save Begging Children (*suishou paizhao jiejiu qitao ertong*, hereafter Take a Photo) and Fight Child Trafficking (*weibo daguai*, literally "microblogging fight against human trafficking") had different purposes: while both started as an attempt to find an abducted child, Take a Photo's objective was not primarily to rescue children but to eradicate child begging for all children, abducted or not. As stated by its initiator, Yu Jianrong, a scholar-activist in the field of rural issues regularly criticizing official policies, "Our ultimate goal, through institution building and public participation, is to reduce and eradicate the phenomenon of child begging. We hope the profitability of child begging will disappear through the promotion of legislative activity and the enactment of strict procedures to verify and relieve child begging" (Chen, Feb. 8, 2011, my

translation). "Micro-blogging may help put an end to the phenomenon of using children to beg," but "[i]t also adds an immense social pressure against child trafficking" (Wang, Feb. 15, 2011). The initial objective of Deng Fei, the investigative journalist who launched Fight Child Trafficking, lay in finding an abducted child, not on dealing with the issue of children begging on the streets. This difference explains some of the criticism received by Yu's action. Both initiatives, launched in early 2011, seemed to have jolted the government into action.

On January 17, 2011, Yu Jianrong received a message on his *Weibo* account from a mother living in the Fujian Province asking for his help in finding her son, who had been abducted in 2009 at the age of six. Yu immediately asked his *Weibo* followers to spread the information. Following discussions with some internet users, a verified *Weibo* account was set to raise public attention about street children and to rescue some who might have been abducted. The Take a Photo *Weibo* account was officially launched on Jan. 25, 2011, on both Sina and Tengxun. Over 7,000 fans were following the Sina account within 24 hours (Today Morning Press, Jan. 31, 2011) and 150,000 two weeks after its launch, generating over 2,000 photos of begging children and more than 810,000 comments (Zhu, Feb. 10, 2011). A team of several volunteers managed the action's account to cope with the inflow of photos and messages in the weeks following the launch (Wang, K., Feb. 1, 2011; Wang, K., Dec. 26, 2011; Wang, G., Feb. 15, 2011; Chen, W., Feb. 8, 2011; Zhu, Y., Feb. 10, 2011; Human Rights in China, Dec. 19, 2012).

Fight Child Trafficking was initiated at the same time by Deng Fei, who played a key role in the search for and rescue of Peng Wenle, a child who had been abducted in March 2008. He learned about the case in July 2008 when he interviewed Peng's father while investigating child trafficking in Shenzhen and Dongguan. In September 2010, he posted the child's picture on his Sina and Tengxun *Weibo* accounts. During Spring Festival in 2011, Deng Fei reposted the picture, which was then forwarded 5,665 times (Deng, 2014, p. 26). In early February, an internet user provided an important clue through a website that specialized in supporting people looking for their relatives. Thanks to this information, Public Security agents located Wenle, who could then be reunited

with his father. This happy outcome was highly celebrated online. Started before Yu Jianrong's action, it came to a happy end with Peng Wenle's rescue two weeks after the launch of Take a Photo.

1.2.1.2 Two activists, two different approaches

Yu Jianrong is the director of the Social Issues Research Center of the Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Online biographies of his career mention that after quickly earning two million yuan—a fortune at that time—as a commercial litigation lawyer in the early nineties, he went on a quest for some meaning in life beyond material gains (Everyone's CV, Baidu Encyclopedia). He obtained a Ph.D. before turning forty and became an expert on rural issues. He first gained public attention in media reports when he argued, prior to the annual political gathering of the Two Sessions in 2005, that the petition (*xinfang*) system should be thoroughly reformed or discarded because it did not adequately address issues brought forward by rural household registration (*hukou*) holders. He has maintained this position ever since (Yu, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2016). He is regularly invited to address local officials on rural issues, an activity for which he receives a much more substantial remuneration for each lecture than his monthly salary at the CASS (20140614_YJR). These invitations from local officials recognize both Yu Jianrong's expertise on rural issues, and that his opinions might help officials deal with these issues.

Deng Fei, also a native of Hunan, started his journalistic career as a young intern in a provincial newspaper, quickly making his way into a more prominent position and showing a predisposition towards investigative journalism. He joined the Phoenix Weekly in 2003, where he became a famous investigative journalist in China and a member of a small but audacious circle of reporters that uncovered numerous affairs in the 2000s (Bandurski & Hala, 2010). While he has become a full-time charity practitioner for several years, he still introduces himself at public events as an investigative journalist, a status to which he is firmly attached. Some of Deng Fei's staff cited his charisma and leadership as key reasons they joined his. As a reporter, he developed a keen sense of what

authorities tolerate in terms of public discussions. Media institutions and their workers are constantly briefed on the Party-state's priorities, as I witnessed when working for a state broadcaster between 2004 and 2007. (As a foreign staff, however, I was not permitted to attend the meetings in which instructions were distributed to my Chinese co-workers.

Parents of abducted children sought Take a Photo and Fight Child Trafficking, and specifically Yu and Deng, for help finding their children through public exposure of their plights.

With their media interventions, Yu and Deng acted as intermediaries between parents and the general public. Charismatic figures projecting commitment and determination, Yu and Deng had demonstrated strong acumen in using Sina's *Weibo* microblogging platform and promoting Take a Photo and Fight Child Trafficking. Chinese media issued numerous reports on the two initiatives, referring to them as public interest (PI) actions (*gongyi xingdong*). Yu and Deng were called "PI personalities" (*gongyi renwu*), sometimes even "PI stars" (*gongyi mingxing*). They appeared in several of the yearly rankings of influential PI personalities[5] published in 2011 and 2012. Media such as *Beijing Times* and CCTV bestowed special awards for their contributions in the public interest sector (a term commonly used in media reports to designate the charity sector.[6])

Take a Photo: a "hard" approach. Despite their similar goals, Deng and Yu chose very different paths for their actions and the way they promoted them. Yu Jianrong adopted a much more vocal and contentious approach. This resulted in Take a Photo coming under scrutiny by the authorities. During personal communications, an official involved in the fight against human trafficking told me that a taskforce was set at the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) to monitor Take a Photo's development and public responses. The prevalent feeling among officials in charge of fighting human trafficking was that Yu's action did not do justice to what the authorities had achieved in the previous years in terms of legal

[5] Numerous examples can be found when typing "*gongyi*" and "*zhuanlan*" (column) or "*gongyi*" and "*paihangbang*" (ranking) in Baidu.
[6] It will become clear in this thesis that I think a distinction should be made between public interest and the other term traditionally used to design the charity sector, *cishan*, translated in English as philanthropy or charity.

improvements and anti-human trafficking initiatives. Officials felt that it sent the public a message that officials were not taking action. Even though Yu occasionally lauded the work done by the authorities in the fight against child trafficking (Zhu, Feb. 10, 2011), he publicly criticized the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) for not facilitating the work of social organizations and for not simplifying intra-department coordination in the fight against child begging (iFeng.com, March 8, 2011; Xinhua, March 10, 2011). Considering the context of an authoritarian one-party regime in China, it is debatable whether Yu's outspoken and relatively "hard" approach was conducive to engaging the various actors needed to sustain the action, especially state actors. Once his initiative had raised public attention, he avoided creating an organization that would have been a key element to sustain it in the long term.

> [When we started] the first action, we did not think at that time that the state would pay so much attention to this matter. Because the state attached great importance to this matter, so we did not set an organization. I think not having an organization is precisely a way to protect this action. If you put forward a clear organization, you might not be able to find a way to register. (20140614_YJR, p. 20)

As an intellectual, Yu declared himself unready to compromise:

> I have never turned myself into a so-called public interest (*gongyi*) person. How do you transform yourself into a public interest person? Deng Fei stopped criticizing the government after he engaged in public interest [actions]. I cannot do this nonsense (*goupi*) public interest and not criticize the government. I think this is not where the responsibility of an intellectual lies. He sometimes ushers in social values, and, of course even more, he supervises public power. This is a big difference between me and Deng Fei. I study political science and sociology. (20140614_YJR, p. 20)

Yu's critical observations are aligned with what he saw as his social role. He refused to be associated with the term PI (*gongyi*), considering it would restrain his freedom of expression and oblige him to enter into a cooperative relationship with the government, a relationship he sought to avoid. He saw himself as a public intellectual involved in sociological research whose duty was to raise public awareness and remain critical of the government. Through his public visibility and sharp comments, he aimed primarily to generate discussion. But his criticisms of public interest initiatives did not fully reflect his own actions. He launched three new initiatives in the 12 months following Take a Photo. All were based on the same principle of "convenience" (*suishou*) that had characterized the first initiative. *Suishou* would impose the smallest burden on those willing to

participate (Wang, Dec. 26, 2011): “Conveniently Bring Books to Rural Villages” (*suishou song shu xiaxiang*), launched May 1, 2011; an action to provide clothes, blankets and food to homeless people during the winter (*suishou jietou jiuzhu*), launched Dec. 2, 2011; and “Conveniently Care for Village Education” (*suishou guan’ai xiangcun jiaoyu*), launched early January 2012, to support children and teachers in poor rural schools. All donations to these actions were eventually channeled through a fund that was officially established on May 5, 2012, the “*Suishou* Public Welfare Fund,” under the management of China Social Welfare Foundation (20140614_YJR). Yu continued to support a small group of volunteers affiliated with the *Suishou* Public Welfare Fund to tour different regions in China, alerting parents to the dangers of child abduction (e.g. Fang, Nov. 4, 2013; Ji, March 31, 2014). Yu did not seek to build an organization whose purpose would be to cooperate with state institutions such as the police (Zeng, Apr. 1, 2014). Instead, he created a shelter called Home (of those) Searching for Children (*xunzi zhi jia*) outside Beijing. The shelter functioned as a point of mutual help for parents trying to gather support in the search for their missing children. Yu provided material support to parents crisscrossing the country to raise awareness of child trafficking, and to promote behaviors lowering the risks of parents’ falling prey to traffickers while searching for their children. The shelter was still running as of June 2014.

Fight Child Trafficking: a softer approach. An investigative journalist turned “*gongyi* king” (Xun, 2015), Deng Fei was instrumental in raising my interest in PI initiatives and PIPs. He had already launched or co-launched eight PI actions by 2014. A native of Hunan who hasn’t lost the characteristic accent of the region’s speakers, he spent a large part of his childhood in the countryside with relatives**.** After graduating with a journalism degree from Hunan University, he started to work as an investigative reporter, first for a local newspaper, then joining Phoenix Weekly in 2003. After numerous reports that touched upon social issues such as forced evictions (e.g. the Yihuang self-immolation case), he left journalism to become a full-time PIP, a transition that started in 2011.

When he launched Fight Child Trafficking at the turn of 2010-2011, Deng Fei had barely started a transition that would see him leave his previous occupation

to become a full-time social activist, or a "public interest personality." This was his first PI initiative. Next came Free Lunch (*mianfei wucan*) in April 2011, which serves lunches to school children whose families and schools do not or cannot provide lunches. It was launched by an alliance of 500 journalists, dozens of domestic mainstream media outlets, and the China Social Welfare Foundation. It is by far the most successful initiative Deng has engineered in terms of public recognition and donations. Between April 2011 and March 2018, donations amounted to 401 million RMB. A total of 977 schools had been covered in 26 provinces, providing lunches to 261,049 beneficiaries (Free Lunch). China Rural Kids Care (*zhongguo xiangcun dabing yibao*) provides medical insurance to rural children affected by serious illnesses. Warm Current (*nuanliu jihua*) supports rural children with items such as stationery, clothes, sportswear. Girls' Protection Plan (*nütong baohu*) raised[7] awareness about sexual abuse against girls in rural areas. Let Birds Fly (*rang houniao fei*) promotes the protection of migratory wild bird habitats. Water Safety Program of China (*zhongguo shui anquan jihua*) encourages public supervision of polluted rivers through real-time reporting of pollution incidents. Hope Farm (e-*nong jihua*) – a particular case, as it is a SE rather than a non-profit PI action – aims to directly sell agricultural products to urban dwellers, to raise the incomes of farmers living in impoverished counties. It thus intends to help them stay in or return to their villages to alleviate social problems stemming from adults leaving the countryside in large numbers, e.g. children growing up without parents, elderly people staying behind without care, and uncultivated land, to cite but a few.

All these initiatives focused on rural issues. Other actions followed between 2014 and 2018, most of them keeping a rural focus, but also including special training programs for the staff of PI organizations and other projects[8]. Together with

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[7] Deng Fei's organization, who had co-launched this action with another organization, left it and created another one with similar objectives when both organizations could not reconcile their views.

[8] One example is Never Give Up, literally the 'heart awakens' (*xin huan xing*), which aims at installing AED equipment in public places with the objective to save persons having just suffered from a stroke. This followed the sudden death of Deng Fei's brother-in-law in a subway station in Beijing in early 2016. The strategy of this action had to be revised when it became clear that the authorities of public transportation facilities were not interested in installing AED equipment. Trying to save lives would engage their responsibility, something they were not ready to contemplate. The new objective became to install such equipment in working environments, e.g. Central Business Districts of major cities.

other activists, in May 2012 Deng Fei created a fund specifically devoted to the fight against child trafficking: *Weibo Daguai* Public Welfare Fund under China Social Assistance Foundation. The fund organizes anti-trafficking charity campaigns, encourages the public to report suspicious cases and urges volunteers to participate. It also aims to raise public awareness through regular media releases and to create synergies between the parties involved, from public security and judicial departments to volunteer networks. Fight Child Trafficking co-workers regularly coordinate operations with police departments to rescue abducted children. One of the fund's objectives is to maintain public awareness.

Such actions require substantial organizational capabilities and the coordination of efforts with and the support of various social actors, including party officials. Only a soft visibility approach is likely to succeed. As early as one year before the online anti-rumor campaign that started in the summer of 2013, Deng Fei did not need to be reminded about the need for caution:

> "For *weibo* (account holders) involved in public interest (activities) to survive, they definitely have to mainly help vulnerable groups. Absolutely. Now we dare not have political demands, or else we lose the chance to survive" (20120919_DF, p. 17).

1.2.1.3 From online interest to popular culture

Online interest. The two actions, especially Yu's with its harder approach, caught the attention of internet users, celebrities and governmental institutions. This attention started online with the growing popularity of *Weibo*, then quickly spread to all types of media. Baidu Index, a tool that monitors internet user search trends and news headlines, shows that searches and news headlines about "trafficking children" (*guaimai ertong*) and "begging children" (*qitao ertong*) reached a peak in February 2011 and remained at a high level in the following 22 months. "Child trafficking" was non-existent on both user and media indexes before early 2011. Online searches by internet users for "trafficking children" were still much higher on average in 2015 and 2016 than in the preceding three years.

***Celebrities*.** Han Hong, a famous singer and member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), announced

on her micro-blog that she would submit to the March 2011 CPPCC meeting proposals for severely cracking down and punishing cases of child trafficking. TV and cinema stars forwarded the messages, expressing their support and asking their followers to do the same. Among these celebrities were the "*Weibo* queen" Yao Chen, Huang Jianxiang, a famous sports program TV anchor, Li Kaifu, ex-CEO of Google in China, and Xue Manzi, a self-anointed angel investor. Xue actively supported these actions and became an online phenomenon before being the most prominent victim of the anti-rumor campaign in 2013. These celebrities forwarded and/or commented the two actions. This contributed in bringing them to the attention of millions of internet users.

Authorities. Public Security departments in numerous regions across China sent messages of support to Yu Jianrong through their *Weibo* accounts (Zhu, 2011; Dong, 2013). On Jan. 28, Chen Shiqu, director of the anti-trafficking office under the Criminal Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security (*gong'anbu xingzhenju daguaiban*), started to follow the Take a Photo *Weibo* account – but unfollowed it later – pledging that he would "use micro-blogging to keep communicating with everyone" (Wang, Feb. 15, 2011; Chen, Feb. 8, 2011). According to a legal expert I interviewed at the end of 2012, heightened public awareness of child trafficking and child begging meant that "the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) faced unprecedented pressure, including a lot of top leaders within the government." Premier Wen Jiabao and MCA vice-minister Dou Yupei had to answer questions related to these issues before and during the Two Sessions in Beijing (Yang, March 9, 2011). Several measures were implemented in the following months, which greatly increased the efficiency of police work.

Because of these events, a report called "Policy Research on the Participation of Social Forces in the Relief Services of Vagrants and Beggars," whose author I interviewed in 2012, reached the Premier's office instead of landing on an unattended pile of documents. All the suggestions it included, such as granting more responsibility to "civil society organizations," were included in the Guiding Opinions of the MCA on the Promotion of Social Forces' Participation in Vagrants and Beggars Rescue Services (Ministry of Civil Affairs, Dec. 26, 2012). Chen Shiqu, the leading national-level official in charge of the fight

against human trafficking also benefited from this new public visibility. The actions provided him with an opportunity to receive support from the highest levels of the state to implement legislation that had not been applied so far. They also boosted the number of his *Weibo* followers (Dong, 2013).

Entry into popular culture. Four years after these two actions, there were signs that the topic of child trafficking had entered popular culture, a spectacular consequence of Take a Photo and Fight Child Trafficking. In 2014 and 2015, two movies enlisting famous actors achieved box-office success: Dearest (*qin'ai de*), directed by the Hong Kong director Peter Chan and featuring mainland stars Zhao Wei, Huang Bo and Dong Dawei, was released in September 2014 and earned approximately RMB 350 million at the box office (Wang, Nov. 4, 2014). "Lost and Love," directed by mainland director Peng Sanyuan and starring Andy Lau, was also a success, taking more than RMB 200 million in revenue (Yu, March 31, 2015). Both movies revolve around individuals who have lost a child to traffickers and have been shattered by this drama. The selection of this topic for commercial movies, the participation of prestigious actors and the resulting box-office successes, all speak for an issue that has obtained social recognition.

Yu Jianrong's and Deng Fei's actions brought the issues of child begging and trafficking into the national spotlight, something the two activists had not originally expected (20120919_DF, 20140614_YJR). Their call for action was relayed by the media, especially in the case of Take a Photo and in the few weeks following the initiative's January 25, 2011 launch. The resulting popular pressure (Wang, 2008), where the force of public opinion imposed itself as an important element that decision makers must consider, led some of the highest representatives of the state to discuss the issue publicly and to take measures.

1.2.2 Features of social media-facilitated activism

What are the particularities of the two initiatives presented above, and other similar actions such as "internet public interest" (*wangluo gongyi*) (Gao, J., 2012), "social public interest actions" (*shehui gongyi xingdong*) (Zhang, 2012), and "popular (i.e. non-governmental) public interest" (*minjian gongyi*) (Shi, 2012)? First, they can be initiated by members of the public (Gao, J., 2012, p.

120), although these individuals often happen to be “key opinion leaders” such as academics, media personalities or social celebrities (Shi, 2012). Second, through the use of social networking services (SNS), they reach out to the public in a direct and immediate way, via mobile phones, for example (Gao, J., p. 120), which allows for the online and offline participation of volunteers (Zhang, 2012, p. 117; Shi, 2012). This includes very small donations and “à la carte” participation. An example is services linking activists, volunteers, donors, and corporations such as *gongyi bao*, or platforms such as *qingsong chou*, allowing online donations to a large number of charity projects. Third, issues that are seldom covered by traditional media can be discussed publicly through SNS (Shi, 2012) in a way that is more emotional than in traditional media (Zhang, 2012, pp. 116-117). Finally, these actions fare better than traditional charity projects in terms of transparency (Zhang, 2012, p. 117). Credibility has been a critical issue, plaguing the charity sector since 2011. “Credibility is the central nervous system that holds together the sustained and stable development of charity organizations” with the public interest character of their activities constituting the essential element on which their credibility is established in the eyes of the public (Gao, Z., 2012, pp. 80-81).

All these features are closely related to the development of SNS like *Weibo* and WeChat since 2010, and of other internet platforms. Take a Photo, Fight Child Trafficking, Love Save Pneumoconiosis and Free Lunch would not have been possible without these innovations. Messages of social solidarity and support to vulnerable groups were mostly spread through *Weibo* until 2013. WeChat – and QQ to a more limited extent before the number of WeChat users exploded – has since become essential to PIOs’ internal and external communications, i.e. for organizational and promotional purposes, and public donations: mobile internet platforms and technologies such as Alibaba’s Tmall and Alipay, Tengxun’s PI donation platform and Sina *Weibo* have enabled any person in possession of a smart phone to become a donor, starting from as little as one RMB or even less. After microblogs (*Weibo*) and “micro-letters” (*weixin*, i.e. WeChat), “micro-public interest” (*wei gongyi*) has made it easy for the public to participate, at least in donations. According to Wang Ming, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and director of Tsinghua University’s NGO

Research Institute, the charity sector is experiencing a comprehensive transformation: it is no longer reserved to a privileged minority; internet users and the mobile internet are becoming important participants; there is a higher participation of the market; themes on which charity revolves have changed; and the mediation model (*zhongjie moshi*) has been replaced by the platform model (*pingtai moshi*) (Ye, 2014).

In the previous pages, I have described at some length internet-facilitated actions that raised public awareness about child trafficking and street children, social issues that had little visibility prior to these initiatives. SNS played a key role in these actions, but a focus on technology does not help to answer why individuals decide to participate in PI initiatives. The comprehensive transformation highlighted by Wang Ming has occurred, and technology has helped. The four features of social media-facilitated activism listed above still apply in 2018, with the important exception of "sensitive" areas authorities deem improper for public discussion. As my reflection progressed, it became apparent that a technology-based approach would not contribute to understanding why PI engagement is on the rise. In the next section, I explain why my focus gradually changed and what the motivations of PIPs may tell us about the evolution of the PI sector.

1.3 Gradual shift of research focus

I did not manage to meet Yu Jianrong before completing my master's thesis. As a result, he was less influential in shaping its content and the early planning stages of my Ph.D. research. I did meet Deng Fei in September 2012. It was the first of many encounters in the following years.

This first meeting, in which Deng Fei argued that his actions had led the government to take actions, strengthened my belief that Wang Shaoguang's popular pressure model (2006, 2008) constituted an accurate reading of the potential influence that public opinion had on public policy agenda setting in China. Activists such as Deng Fei and Yu Jianrong contributed to create a public discussion that generated enough reaction to provoke the authorities into

responding. Whether this constituted a "bridge [between] public discourse and people's experiential knowledge" that "support(ed) and sustain(ed) collective action" (Gamson, 1995, p. 85) remained to be analyzed. I decided that the literature on social movements and social activism (Chen, 2012; Hsing & Lee, 2010; Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Li, 2011; Liu, 2009; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001; O'Brien & Li, 2006; Tong & Lei, 2014) represented a good foundation to approach the analysis of initiatives such as those launched by Deng and Yu. The internet in general, especially social media, seemed to have given birth to citizen activism that could express outrage about cases of social injustice while providing hope for solving some social issues (Castells, 2012; Yang, 2009).

I was impressed by the impact of these two initiatives and the commitment of activists such as Deng Fei to pushing for institutional changes that could improve the situations of some disadvantaged or vulnerable groups (*ruoshi qunti*). I found such actions meaningful, thrilling, even exhilarating. The impressions left by this first meeting with Deng Fei, my study of the two actions related to child abduction, the atmosphere of change that could be felt with the rise of social media in China: all these factors combined to convince me that China was experiencing major changes in social activism. As a result, Deng lay at the center of my thesis until I started the second stage of my fieldwork, which I describe in Chapter 3. Only then did I decide not to pursue my second research focus on boundary spanning and brokerage. A charismatic leader such as Deng Fei seemed the right actor to investigate the boundary-spanning and brokerage potential of a PI practitioner. "Boundary 'spanners' are actors whose activities in the organization are heavily influenced by their inclusions in social cognitive structures outside the organization" (Peverelli & Verdyun, 2012, p. 83), while "an individual who connects two or more otherwise disconnected individuals (who have a structural hole between them) has more social capital than an individual who does not hold such a "brokering" position" (Xiao & Tsui, 2007, p. 1). Constantly engaged in mobilizing different social actors, Deng Fei would certainly offer insights into these processes. But several factors emerged that brought me to gradually shift my focus away from PI actions as new forms of activism and towards PIPs and their motivations.

1.3.1 Internet control and WeChat domination

In the interviews I conducted with Yu Jianrong and Deng Fei, both stated that Take a Photo and Fight Child Trafficking could not have been launched without the emergence of *Weibo*. It provided a space to raise issues deemed sensitive by the authorities, e.g. the direct election of NPC members at the county and village levels in 2011 (Shi, 2012). But following the internet crackdown that started in the summer of 2013, they admitted that the same actions would not be possible anymore. The 2013 anti-rumor campaign and stricter regulations in the field of ideological control (Ranade, Nov. 14, 2013) put an end to most such discussions, even though tight controls were already in place in 2011. The authorities reined in vocal critics who expressed their opinions on social and political issues, putting an end to what they saw as online dissent. Less than a year after concluding in my master's thesis that what I called the homeostatic functions of *Weibo* would supposedly result in a "process of gradual 'osmosis' … between the party-state and society," I had to seriously revise my assumptions about "How Weibo is Changing China" (Magistad, 2012). But the role of SNS remains fundamental today, even if its nature has changed, taking a more organizational turn, with activists and volunteers discussing and organizing their work via WeChat informal groups (Ruelle & Peverelli, 2016).

Strengthened controls were not the only reason the *Weibo* craze came to an end: commercial forces also contributed. The emergence, then market domination, of WeChat also spelled trouble for *Weibo*, with a growing number of internet users leaving the *Weibo* platform for WeChat[9]. This all-around SNS became ubiquitous in the years following WeChat's January 2011 launch by Tencent. Instead of providing a stage like *Weibo* on which influential voices could address millions of internet users, WeChat linked single individuals with other single individuals and enabled users to create small groups enabling constant and direct communication through text, voice and video messaging. It guaranteed that discussions would remain shared among many fewer individuals than discussions

[9] It is worth mentioning though that *Weibo* remains a strong player among China's SNS providers. Sina, *Weibo*'s owner and operator, has turned *Weibo* into a commercially successful SNS that is still widely used outside tier-1 cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou etc. in China. Sina claimed that there were 340 million active monthly users during the first quarter of 2017 (tech.sina.com.cn).

using *Weibo*. WeChat provided a function not offered by microblog services, but also made spreading messages to a large audience more difficult.

Following the internet crackdown and the rise of WeChat, I struggled to find new cases of internet-facilitated actions that could be compared with the examples I mentioned above. If the claim that public interest actions constituted "a new form of collective actions (…) blurring the boundaries between social and political activism in China" – the original title of my thesis proposal – were to be supported, I would have to be able to identify more than just a few cases. I could not. While this did not signify that less mediatized actions had no impact on policymaking, it meant a higher degree of difficulty in identifying such actions.

1.3.2 Encountering new PIPs

While the conclusion of my first academic project and the premise of my Ph.D. proposal were shaky, the overall trend of the PI sector could not be denied: a growing number of individuals were joining the ranks of PIOs either as volunteers or full-time practitioners. I came across some of these individuals during the preliminary stage of my research, mostly university students who contributed their time as volunteers or fresh graduates who decided to work full-time as PIPs. These PI initiatives could not have existed without their active participation. Most were related to FL, co-launched by Deng Fei. A majority belonged to the "generations" of the post-1980 and post-1990, as it has become the norm to call them in China. These age groups, often strangely presented as coherent generations possessing similar traits, used to be negatively portrayed in Chinese media. This was especially evident regarding the post-1980 until 2008, a year marked by two events that saw numerous representatives of this "generation" volunteer for relief work after the Wenchuan earthquake and for the Beijing Olympics. At which point a group depicted in Chinese academia as being "irresponsible," "immature" and "childish" (e.g. Zhang & Zhao, 2008; Liu, Yang & Lu, 2008; Yu, 2009; Tan, 2009; Xu & Xing, 2013) suddenly became associated with terms such as dedication and enthusiasm; from a lost generation it had been transformed into one symbolizing hope, possessing a heightened self-awareness, relative independent thinking and taking the initiative when facing

challenges (Liang, 2011, pp. 7-12). Interestingly, it seems that some of the evils previously attributed to the post-1980, such as their individualism and selfishness, were passed on to their successors, the post-1990. These two age groups represented most of the actors I met during this research[10], the rank and file of the PI sector.

In January 2014, I encountered two persons deeply committed to their PI activities. These were the very first persons I interviewed after completing my master's degree apart from Deng Fei. I intended, through some exploratory discussions, to become acquainted with individuals having a good understanding of the PI sector in China. One of them closely cooperated with Deng Fei. He was a volunteer spending around half of his time engaged in PI actions, the other half being spent on his professional activity as a lawyer. The other person had already been working in the PI sector for a decade and bore no relation to Deng Fei's actions. She had founded an organization that operated like a SE, even if it had been registered as a commercial enterprise – the constrictions surrounding the legal status of SEs in China often requires social entrepreneurs to register their organizations as commercial enterprises. I did not bring a whole set of questions to the interviews, which unfolded like open discussions. I wanted to understand their activities and their engagement in the PI sector. In my mind, they were social activists engaged in contentious activities, even if the boundaries of what constituted contention remained difficult to define. Some of the literature on social activism already warned that "legal mobilization, civic activism, and symbolic forms of subversion can provide avenues to change that are quieter, at times invisible, but may result in more sustainable progress than mass protest" (Hsing and Lee, 2009, p. 2). These two encounters–and most of those which followed–led me to question my assumptions regarding social activism and its relation to contentious politics.

1.3.3 Away from contention

The two individuals I interviewed in January 2014 displayed no contentious features. As a lawyer regularly involved in protecting the legal rights (*weiquan*)

[10] See Chapter 3 for a complete description of all participants.

of disadvantaged people, I expected the first interviewee to use contentious language criticizing power in general and specific authorities in particular. Instead, the discussion often revolved around his own motivations, why he had decided to invest so much of his time and energy in non-remunerated voluntary activities. To my surprise, there was no mention of a certain sense of injustice or other related concepts that could have constituted a driving force for his PI activities. Before working as an accountant specializing in servicing PI organizations, and now being recognized as an authority in that field, the second interviewee had worked for many years for a state-owned enterprise. She described her parents as "100% Bolsheviks, no doubt." They had instilled in her values that were aligned with the regime. She did not see herself as working against the current system. She hoped rather to improve some of its numerous flaws in a clearly-delineated area, the one she had become expert in: accounting practices for PI organizations that often don't know how to navigate the intricacies of this domain. Both individuals could still be called activists working to enact some social changes. But their activities did not translate into marches, protests or other forms of contention often associated with social activism. They did not reflect grievances and outline strategies and tactics of protest. They just "did it," i.e. they just did the work they had set out to do – a sentence I would often hear during fieldwork – in their respective areas: legal and accounting expertise. The accountant had developed a business model that ensured her company was kept afloat, but her goal was not maximizing her profit. While her tasks and workload grew, her revenues remained modest. Profit did not constitute her main motivation or that of the lawyer, who provided free legal advice as a PI volunteer. Both went to great lengths to promote initiatives within the PI sector and, subsequently, contributed to its development.

Most of the practitioners I met during my research worked in organizations whose projects revolved around children, education and poverty alleviation. In other words, they operated in areas identified by the Chinese authorities as social priorities, i.e. environmental protection, and child development, not in more sensitive domains related to LGBT, AIDS, or religious activism. These practitioners did not intend to engage in contentious politics. They virtually never used vocabulary that alluded to contentious objectives, even less to the notion of

social protest or social movements. They repeatedly told me they were "doing public interest" (*zuo gongyi*) and only seldom used the term *cishan*, usually translated as "charity" or "philanthropy." This brought me to the conclusion that my previous focus on internet-based movements as a new type of social protest leading to more political participation had to be seriously revised. The literature I had previously touched upon for my master's thesis could not provide satisfactory directions to better understand these actors. My main research question and theoretical frame had to evolve if they were to be more aligned with the narratives of the actors I had encountered so far. I changed course and aimed for better understanding of actors' motivations for participating in PI activities as volunteers, as full-time practitioners in official PIOs or as co-workers in organizations registered as commercial enterprises but operating in PI circles or with avowed PI objectives.

1.4 PIPs' motivations in the face of multiple challenges

As I became acquainted with more "anonymous" PIPs during the second stage of my fieldwork at Deng Fei's headquarters in Hangzhou, my interest in their motivations grew. Often well educated, most of them seemed to have consciously chosen PI as a sector when many other options were available in today's labor market. This did not seem to constitute a natural choice, especially considering the challenges faced by this sector, challenges aptly summarized as the "three lows" by Wang Zhenyao (Zhang, 2012, p. 117), a former MCA official who established and led the Social Welfare and Charity Promotion Division of that ministry before becoming the Dean of Beijing Normal University China Philanthropy Research Institute and more recently of Shenzhen China Global Philanthropy Institute. He characterized these "three lows" as the low starting point of the whole sector (which implies a low level of understanding and support by the public); the low number of charity organizations; and the low level of donations – especially following several scandals in 2011. Wang Zhenyao's comments were made before 2012, but they still partly applied in 2018.

1.4.1 Challenges of the PI sector

The recent growth of the PI sector should not mask the difficulties it faces today in China. First, growth in terms of number of organizations, participants and donations only constitutes one aspect of the sector's health and development. These figures say little about the sector's reputation, the quality of its management, its efficiency in dealing with social issues and its ability to attract talent. Second, the sector's growth has not been uninterrupted since the 1980s: several periods of contractions occurred at times of political restrictions, e.g. after the Tiananmen tragedy in 1989 and following the issuance of "Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations" in 1998, which imposed all "social organizations [to] find a professional management unit (*yewu zhuguan danwei*) that will act as sponsor, and is usually referred to as the sponsoring unit (*guakao danwei*) or 'mother-in-law' in Chinese" (Saich, 2000, p. 129). Third, official figures only partially reflect the situation in China. How many non-registered NPOs operate in China remains a mystery. Often associated with the term "grassroot" (Spires, 2014), these non-registered organizations probably constitute the vast majority of the overall sector (Shieh et al., 2013, p. xii; Simon, 2013, p. xxxiv.; cited by Hsu & Jiang, 2015, p. 101), but one that is very hard to evaluate. Fourth, the sector faces issues of trust and credibility, its reputation remaining fragile. Regular reports of wrongdoing harm its standing and suspicion remains in the public whether donations are properly spent. In 2011 a series of scandals greatly affected public foundations such as China Red Cross, China Charity Federation, and Henan Soong Ching Ling Foundation. The scandals threatened to sink the sector's reputation at a time when the notions of charity, philanthropy (*cishan*) and public interest (*gongyi*) were far from being household concepts. The most damaging of these scandals, the Guo Meimei affair, had a very negative impact on the sector. With SNS such as *Weibo* – and later Tencent WeChat – bursting onto the scene and bringing the latest news about the scandal to most mobile and internet users, donations decreased by 18% year-on-year in 2011. It took three years to return to that level (Song, 2017). Gao Zhihong used the term alienation (*yihua*) (2012) to qualify the reactions of social actors such as governmental institutions, the general public, the media and enterprises.

1.4.1.1 Social media no panacea

SNS have facilitated information sharing and donations by millions of individuals, but it has barely made it easier for most PIOs to raise their profile, reach their audiences and take advantage of an event such as the 9.9 Public Interest Day. During the 2017 edition of the 9.9 Public Interest Day, over 12,68 million aggregated users donated to 6,466 PI projects, a number that constitutes only a tiny fraction of PI projects run by PIOs in China. Even in terms of popular donations, participation in China remains at a very low level by global comparison. According to the CAF World Giving Index 2015, China was last among 144 polled countries in terms of the proportion of individuals having donated money to charity that year (Charities Aid Foundation, 2015). The situation remained similar in 2017 with "one of the lowest participation rates in the world at just 8%" (Charities Aid Foundation, 2017, p. 20).

There are no tangible signs that the sector has significantly improved in terms of transparency and financial disclosure, with recent reports showing slow or no progress in that area (China Development Brief, 24 April 2017; Huang et al, 13 Sept. 2017; Tan, 8 April 2015). There also exists a risk that events such as 9.9 Public Interest Day and the way SNS have apparently facilitated participation might generate more clicktivism (Morozov, 2011) or slacktivism (Morozov, 2009) than enduring commitment to non-profit causes[11].

As for discussions about topics deemed sensitive by the authorities, e.g. homosexuality or women's rights, they have not become easier in recent years, as illustrated by the closure of a sub-discussion board devoted to gays on the popular online forum Tianya (SupChina, 30 Sept. 2017), or the major crackdown and arrests on feminists in 2015 (Hildebrandt & Chua, 2017, p. 14). Most of the PIPs I met during this research are admittedly active in areas not deemed sensitive, including rural issues, children and education-related projects, issues faced by mentally handicapped people, etc. The sensitivity of a topic remains aleatory and hard to evaluate. Doing PI in regions where Han are in the minority

[11] It is also unclear whether an event created by a company with clear marketing and reputational objectives can benefit the long-term development of the PI sector and a better understanding of that sector among the general public, thus addressing one of the three lows mentioned by Wang Zhenyao.

may become problematic, not because of areas such as education or medical care, but because ethnic issues are potentially volatile in China. Two PIPs I interviewed worked in potentially volatile regions. PIPs working to protect the environment can refer to favorable national laws and priorities, but that does not necessarily amount to the support of local authorities. Publicizing any PI activity in those regions may be interpreted by local authorities as exposing problems that are best left untouched, or at least unpublicized. It makes PIPs' work not only delicate and risky, it also increases the difficulty of some tasks such as fundraising, a reality that two PIPs invoked during their interviews.

1.4.1.2 Misrepresentations of PIPs

I could very often verify while living and working in China the accuracy of Wang Zhenyao's assessment of the low starting point of the whole sector. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations often came to the fore during informal discussions with people I came across in China in recent years. When asked about my professional activity, I answered that I studied the motivations of public interest practitioners in China. I often encountered surprise, sometimes even suspicion. These informal discussions occurred with taxi drivers, white collar workers, entrepreneurs, etc. I was sometimes told it was understandable that a person, especially a young one, could be attracted to the idea of volunteering for a cause. But reactions often changed and took a far-from-appreciative turn when considering the PI sector as a full-time professional activity: Opting for that sector must stem from a lack of ability to find a "proper" job in another sector with better incomes. Why would someone opt for a line of work not offering high material rewards if given the choice?

Misrepresentations of PIPs are easy to find in Chinese media. Media articles reporting on PIPs often focus on their low incomes and the sacrifices they make to sustain their ideals. Affectionate love is sometimes cited as a reason for PIPs to pursue their engagement, like a religion guiding them through difficulties. Material challenges certainly ranked high among many of the PIPs who participated in this research, but I haven't met a single individual citing love or

selflessness as her main motivation for choosing to be active in the PI sector, either as a volunteer or as a professional practitioner.

1.4.2 Motivations of public interest practitioners

Most of the volunteers and other practitioners I have met went to university, or at least to junior colleges (*dazhuan*). In Western scholarly literature, it has been established that volunteers usually possess a high level of education (Schlegelmich & Tynan, 1989; Smith, 1999).

1.4.2.1 Volunteers' motivations

Regarding what motivates individuals to act as volunteers, some scholars have noted that "to be considered as a volunteer, altruism must be the central motive where the reward is intrinsic to the act of volunteering. The volunteer's motive is a selfless one" (Bussel & Forbes, 2002, p. 248). Altruism thus constitutes one motivation (Unger, 1991), as does helping others (Thippayanuruksakul, 1989; Okun, 1994). But egoistic motives also play a role, such as selective incentives (prestige, social contact) and improvement of social capital (Mueller, 1975).

In China. Volunteering is widespread in China among university students. Numerous studies review the motives behind their participation. Self-interest for self-development, altruistic motives for social development, and a combination of both are often cited (Chen & Wei, 2014). Among 4,279 respondents, 84% of whom were university students, Deng et al. distinguished between exogenous and endogenous forms of egoism and altruism as main motivations for volunteering (Deng, Xin, & Zhai, 2015). Deng focused on the purely selfish and self-oriented motivations of university students, nothing that: "Many people believe that volunteering activities are purely devoted to others, that volunteers do not need and should not obtain any benefits. This kind of thinking is biased" (He, 2013, p. 77). Others explain that NGO workers' behavior is motivated by the pursuit of faith (*xinyang*) and provides a new model for moral practice (Wang, 2009), although what faith entails is not clearly explained.

1.4.2.2 From a comparative perspective

A growing number of scholars have studied volunteering as an international phenomenon and in a comparative way (Hodgkinson, 2003; Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2012; Inglehart, 2003; Salamon & Anheier, 1998; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2003). It has been established that unlike in Western countries, where voluntary organizations may choose to challenge state institutions, this does not occur in China due to the authoritarian nature of the regime (Chen, 2009; Ma 2002a, 2002b). Regarding motivations, volunteering is usually considered the free choice of an individual in Western countries, the choice being influenced by factors such as religious values, the hope of building social capital or improving career prospects (Hall, Lasby, Ayer, & Gibbons, 2009; Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010; Musick & Wilson, 2008; Reed & Selbee, 2003). Nonprofits and voluntary associations generally recruit volunteers at the grassroots level, the role of the government being negligible. The situation is reversed in China, where volunteer efforts are often initiated by the government in direct or indirect ways (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2012). The authorities often promote voluntary engagement, which they see as representing a higher morality and a respectable social behavior (Xu & Ngai, 2011).

Hustinx et al. insist on the non-adversarial, almost utilitarian role played by NGOs in China, as any form of organization remains carefully scrutinized by the authorities:

> For the CCP and the government, NGOs should not be the fruit of people exercising their rights of association. Rather, they are subject to official approval and regulation, and are desirable only in so far as they deliver what the party-state needs. (Ma 2006:47–48)
> (Cited by Hustinx et alia, 2012, p. 61)

Comparing Canadian and Chinese students, Hustinx et al. found that

> … the collective benefit of volunteering significantly affects Chinese students' volunteering. The positive effect of public benefits echoes the discourse of the Chinese government's efforts to promote volunteering. What is of further interest is that institution-driven private benefits do not influence student volunteer participation at all. This suggests that while Chinese students are likely to volunteer due to service requirements, they do not see this as a benefit of volunteering. Thus, Chinese students see volunteering as providing few private benefits and they have, to a significant extent, adopted the publicly endorsed discourse promoting collective benefits of volunteering. (Hustinx et al., 2012, p. 74)

They also called for renewed efforts to better understand the field of volunteerism in China and the need of an alternative conceptual framework to understand their motivations (Hustinx et al., 2012, p. 58).

While the motivations of volunteers in China have already caught the attention of scholars, few studies revolve around those of full-time practitioners who have chosen the PI sector as a career. Lu wrote that some "fee-charging social service organizations, such as private nursing homes and childcare institutions" represent cases of NGOs which "have been set up by people whose real motive is profit" (Lu, 2009, p. 120). Shambaugh argues that "… the whole premise of philanthropy and contributing selflessly to common public goods is alien to the thinking of many Chinese" (2014). Considering all difficulties encountered by full-time practitioners during their work - e.g. low visibility and public recognition, lack of or insufficient external support, low salaries, limited career development opportunities, lack of guarantees regarding the sustainable development of the whole PI sector - it is all the more remarkable that most of the full-time practitioners I interviewed during my fieldwork still remained active in the sector after at least three years of engagement. Thus, if Shambaugh is right in his judgement, then it is very hard to make sense of PIPs' motivations.

Considering all the challenges still existing in the PI sector, it is even more remarkable that a growing number of individuals enter the sector, as full-time practitioners, as volunteers or as employees of SEs. In the next chapter, I present the theoretical framework of this thesis. I take a social constructivist perspective, assimilating PI to a construct that appeared in the early 1980s and has evolved since then into a reality that includes a growing number of individuals and organizations. While numerous attempts have been made at understanding what motivates students to work as volunteers in China, there is very little research examining the reasons for the involvement of PIPs in PI activities. I argue in that chapter that sensemaking offers an alternative approach to the civil society framework. Instead of *a priori* dividing Chinese society in three parts with different roles, functions and objectives, sensemaking provides a flexible toolbox to analyze individual motivations. It starts from the constructions of PIPs

themselves, following a dialectical and dialogical approach that addresses the ideals set by the social constructivist approach.

That approach and the methodology adopted throughout this research are presented in Chapter 3. That chapter discusses some of the methodological difficulties that were encountered and what measures were taken to resolve those difficulties, including narrative techniques that were well adapted to sensemaking in particular and a social constructivist approach in general. It also presents the three different stages of this research and the participants who generously provided their time and attention to indulge my interest.

Chapter 4 introduces the first individuals interviewed in the course of this research. The main objective of this chapter is to understand how these individuals perceive their involvement, how they make sense of their PI commitment and which element of what I call a PI identity can be detected.

Chapter 5 concentrates on PIPs' search for sense and what factors trigger this search. It shows that personal development constitutes an important motivation for sustained PI engagement, along with the pursuit of certain values, presented through PIPs' narratives, showing how sensemaking can also be used to identify participants' axiological concerns.

Chapter 6 discusses how PIPs understand the concept of PI and how the values they adhere to and the objectives they pursue sometimes clash with the realities they confront, The chapter looks at how they respond to these conflicts, particularly in the face of the lack of legitimation of the whole PI sector, even though the institutionalization process has greatly progressed in the last three decades.

In the final chapter, I review the most important findings of this research at the theoretical and empirical levels. These include adopting sensemaking as a more neutral theoretical choice than using civil society to understand some social phenomena in China, such as the motivations of PIPs; and revising our understanding of what is problematically called the third sector in the civil society literature. I also suggest further areas of research that would deepen our understanding of PIPs' social roles and contributions.

Chapter 2 Sensemaking as a Theoretical Framework

> That law ["Law of the Excluded Middle"] conveniently divides all propositions into two classes: true and false. The human mind finds such dualisms congenial; dualisms are rampant in the history of Western thought: Soma/pysche, body/soul, good/evil, energy/matter, monism/pluralism, liberal/conservative, self/other, part/ whole, animate/inanimate, concrete/abstract, rational/emotional, sacred/profane, and the like. This true/false dualism leads to the conclusion that any proposition that is not true must be false. If, however, we permit the excluded middle to take on several possible values ("sometimes true," "true only if...," "true only until midnight of December 31, 2015, but false thereafter..."), wholly different logics might emerge.
>
> (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 29)

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework I have applied to this research. I take a social constructivist perspective, assimilating PI to a construct that appeared in the early 1980s and has evolved into a reality that includes a growing number of individuals and organizations. The reasons behind this evolution are not fully understood yet, especially at the individual level. While there exist numerous attempts at understanding what motivates students to work as volunteers in China, there is very little research examining the reasons for involvement of full-time PIPs in PI activities. I argue in that chapter that sensemaking offers an alternative approach to the civil society framework. Instead of *a priori* dividing Chinese society into three parts - with different roles, functions, and objectives - sensemaking provides an analytical toolbox to comprehend individual motivations. While it is not devoid of biases on the side of the researcher, it strives to start from the constructions of PIPs themselves, thus following a dialectical and dialogical framework that approaches the ideals set by the social constructivism.

2.1 State-society paradigm

A limited number of theoretical approaches dominate when it comes to studying social activism in China and other countries. One of the most enduring in the last decades has been civil society, especially in the West. It has been advocated by famous scholars such as John Keane and Daniel Bell and applied to the study of developing countries (Ma, 1994), including China. China scholars, especially Western ones, have debated for years whether a civil society, including the public space necessary for its existence, is a reality in China (Simon, 2013, p. xxxi).

State corporatism has provided another theoretical approach applied to the description and explanation of how NGOs operate in China (Unger, 2008; Unger and Chan, 2015). Like the civil society framework, it suggests a fundamental opposition between the state and society, with the former dictating the agenda and controlling the latter. The civil society or state corporatism models have been revised by various scholars with the aim of accounting for the complexity of the Chinese environment. These revisions include earlier efforts such as socialist corporatism (Pearson, 1997), agency corporatism (Ru and Ortolano, 2008), semi-civil society (He, 1997) and state-led civil society (Frolic, 1997) (cited in Shieh, 2009, pp. 22-23). They also include more recent versions, such as consultative Leninism (Tsang, 2009), graduated controls (Kang and Han, 2008), regulation, negotiation, and societalization (Shieh, 2009), contingent symbiosis (Spires, 2011) and consultative authoritarianism (Teets, 2013) (cited in Fulda et al, 2012, p. 676; Hsu and Jiang, 2015, p. 104).

All these approaches share a common foundation: the dualism of state and society, the “state-society paradigm” (Perry, 1994). One of the main reasons, remarks Alan Fowler, is that “civil society in its narrow Western theoretical grounding is inherently about power relations between state and citizen,” a relation in which “civil society is to constrain the natural tendency of government to expand its sphere of influence, resorting to civil disobedience in extreme cases” (Fulda et al., p. 676). For influential civil society theorists such as Cohen and Arato, “the concept of civil society is indispensable if we are to understand the stakes of these ‘transitions to democracy’ [in Latin America and Eastern

Europe] as well as the self-understanding of the relevant actors" (Cohen and Arato, 1994, p. 2). As Simon summarizes:

> The political conception, which derives mostly from the Anglo-American liberal tradition of political theory, equates "civil society" with "political society" in the sense of a particular set of institutionalized relationships between state and society based on the principles of citizenship, civil rights, representation, and the rule of law. (Simon, 2013, p. xxxii)

Not only do I agree with the position that "such maximal definitions of civil society do not fully grasp the nature of civil society development in the People's Republic of China" (Fulda et al, 2012, p. 676), I also suggest that civil society – or a derived concept such as state corporatism – does not constitute a theoretical framework suitable to comprehending some of the phenomena related to the social activism occurring in China today. A number of scholars have explored new territories since the 2000s (e.g. Hsu, 2010; Hsu and Jiang, 2015; Shieh; 2009; Fulda, 2012; Lu, 2009). Following the seminal work of Lieberthal and Oksenberg (1988), they recognize the fragmented character of the Chinese state but eschew the state-society opposition that marks most of the scholarship on China's social activism. I review some of these scholars' work below.

2.2 Beyond state versus society

For Saich, social organizations in China negotiate with the state their own niches. "In some cases, the outcome may be a close 'embedded' relationship with the state," an association that places social organizations in a subordinate position, but where they can also derive benefits (Saich, 2000, p. 139). Lu Yiyi argues that "A deep understanding of the nature and functions of Chinese NGOs requires that researchers disaggregate both 'state' and 'society' to take into account the diverse interests and goals within them" (Lu, 2009, pp. 8-9). She advances the concept of "dependent autonomy," in which she suggests that much depends on the skills of individual NGOs in "working the system" in order to maximize both the support from the state and their autonomy.

Fulda et al. (2012) support a similar view: they contend that "the analytical framework of civil society tends to overemphasise the ability of CSOs [civil society organizations] to protect their autonomy vis-à-vis the party-state. The

corporatist framework on the other hand exaggerates the constraining power of existing political institutions on CSO agency" (Fulda et al., 2012, p. 677). The authors, who "explore what kind of strategies CSOs apply when establishing a relationship of mutual trust" (ibid, p. 678) with state actors emphasize the importance and efficiency of establishing such relationships with "first-in-command" within state bureaus, i.e., officials with decision-making power.

Yu and Ming (2003) consider that the rise of governance theories extends the analytical framework of state-society relations and offers a new type of state-society relationship paradigm. Governance includes the involvement of all types of institutions, civil society, various interest groups and interdepartmental consultations, working to overcome the capacity limitations of both state and civil society and attempting to establish an interactive network between state and civil society (cited in Yuan & Liu, 2014, p. 8).

Hsu criticizes the civil society framework and the privatization approach because both assume a "zero-sum game" between state and society. She proposes an "organizational perspective" in which Chinese NGOs strive to build alliances with state agencies and actors: "Chinese NGOs are primarily interested in maintaining a supply of the resources they need to remain viable and to serve their constituencies as well as possible" (Hsu, 2010, p. 260). Based on her research conducted at seven Chinese NGOs, she advances that the main factor determining NGO actors' strategies is their institutional experiences and cultural frameworks. Partnering with state actors or agencies is often the best way of securing an organization's existence and to have a deeper impact: if NGOs demonstrate that their approaches are working in the areas they operate, local/provincial state agencies might be interested in implementing them at the regional level. While this does not signify equality between NGOs and state agencies, it bears the features of a "symbiotic relationship" – a concept partly endorsed by Spires and his idea of "contingent symbiosis" (Spires, 2013) – that constitutes an alliance conducive to securing resources and providing legitimacy to both types of organizations (Hsu, 2010).

Hsu is neither the first nor the last scholar attempting to use a framework looking into interactions between NGOs and other actors in China without adopting the civil society approach, allowing her to avoid the state versus society dualism.

Shieh (2009) suggests a regulation-negotiation-societalization perspective that focuses on how state actors regulate social organizations (SOs); how SOs are constantly engaged in a negotiation process with state actors to subsist and possibly develop; and how a growing number of SOs pursue societalization strategies that increase both their outreach and capacity through approaches such as networking with domestic and international organizations.

2.3 An alternative Approach

This short overview of some recent studies shows that a growing number of scholars have been trying to avoid the state-versus-society duality – even if the shadow of this enduring opposition hangs over most approaches. O'Brien, speaking of "contentious politics," emphasizes that it "is not always a story of neatly divided antagonists, with representatives of the state on one side and members of the popular classes on the other side" (O'Brien, 2003, p. 52). Thireau and Hua suggest that looking into spaces of political contestation might not yield the best results for contemporary researchers aiming at understanding "social recomposition" in China:

> The political spaces towards which we must now look in China to understand the modalities of social recomposition are not so much the places of public debate in which political power is contested as the spaces in which, through the discussions and claims concerning the fair distribution of social goods and the making of a social link that is considered fair and legitimate, the commitments, orientations and devices of this political power, past and present, are used, reinterpreted or reaffirmed because they must be the foundation of State action. In such spaces, which are multiplying today with the pace of legislation and the measures taken by the government to order society, there is a process of legitimation that affects not only the principles of justice or common references that ought to govern social relationships, but also the forms of political power. (Thireau, Hua, 2001, p. 1312, my translation)

These scholars' arguments caution against examining social phenomena in China through old lenses, as these perspectives might not yield the best results. One example of such required circumspection concerns the categorization of actors involved in PI actions. I met several CPC members while interviewing volunteers of Free Lunch (FL), one of the PI actions I came across in the early stages of this research. Working as civil servants in their day jobs, they spent a substantial amount of their free time working as volunteers for FL. Some other volunteers

were members of media organizations, which constitute a category of their own, officially part of and subordinated to the political system, but also constrained by commercial pressures and the need to produce stories appealing to their audiences, priorities that might not align with those of political authorities. Such media workers often acted as intermediaries between governmental institutions and PI organizations, facilitating their interactions while catering to the interests of both sides.

In the course of this research, I came across several examples of close cooperation between actors supposedly at odds in the civil society framework. One of them was narrated by Cao Jin, a participant who had been working in the same environmental PIO for four years at the time of the interview. He referred to a new law promulgated in early 2015 that allows environmental PIOs who have been registered for at least five years and have a perfect legal record to sue enterprises polluting the environment:

> Let me give you some background. Guess who sent us the first invitation to launch a public interest lawsuit? (...) It was the Environmental Protection Agency. Because to them, it is actually very embarrassing, there are some companies they can't handle. (...) They have no power. They can't implement, they have no enforcement (power), they have no choice but to go to court. They would rather have you going through the court than bringing the case to court themselves, right? They go through courts for enforcement. They think that PIOs can help them to do this and they feel very happy about it.
>
> So, our local EP office raised the matter early this year, they hoped we would undertake public interest lawsuits. Then we told them that we hadn't reached the (required registration) time. They were very disappointed and said that when we reached that time, we should immediately contact them.
>
> Because I'm often in contact with them, I've been told by the environmental protection bureau that once we can sue, they welcome us to set up a desk in their office, at the Department of Letters and Visits. (20151013_CJ, pp. 11-12)

As explained in Chapter 1, I set out on this research project with the "zero-sum game" mindset decried by Hsu, equating powerful social media-facilitated movements in 2011 and 2012 with the expression of rising civil forces taking away some of the initiative that had previously mainly belonged to the government. But a series of interviews conducted in the first stage of my fieldwork led me to growing doubts about the adequacy of the civil society framework. The participants did not narrate stories alluding to a struggle between "good and evil," often concentrating instead on their personal reasons for having started their PI engagement. This is why I gradually changed course, leaving the

civil society paradigm behind, and looking instead for an approach that would be more fitting to understanding the narratives of these individuals "doing PI." I suggest that adopting sensemaking as a theoretical framework allows for a better understanding of PIPs' motivations than the civil society framework.

2.3.1 Social constructivism as foundation

Hsu and Jiang, in one of the papers reviewed above, explain their organizational perspective, arguing that "NGOs as organizations [are] in the process of creating a new organizational field," a process that provides "the rare opportunity to examine why certain practices become institutionalized as the established procedures of an organizational field, while other practices do not" (Hsu and Jiang, 2015, p. 101). We are indeed witnessing the construction process of a new social and organizational field in China, which I call the PI sector throughout this thesis. I am interested in understanding how PI participants represent their motivations to explain their involvement, how they make sense of their engagement and what this sensemaking process implies for PI as a new construct. My concern is not primarily organizational, but the theoretical toolkit I have assembled owes a lot to organizational studies, with social constructivism as a general foundation.

2.3.1.1 PI as a construct

> As defined by Hubley and Zumbo (2013), a "construct may be conceived of as a concept or a mental representation of shared attributes or characteristics, and it is assumed to exist because it gives rise to observable or measurable phenomena" (p. 3). (Shealy, 2015, p. 15, note 10).

PIPs' motivations provide a way of understanding the attributes and characteristics they associate with the PI sector, the meanings they ascribe to their realities (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 11), in short, their socially constructed reality. PI is a new construct that has only started to emerge in China in the last three decades. There exists no "bracketed absolute truth" (Cottone, 2012) yet, no fixed state of affairs so strongly accepted by all members of the PI sector that it would already have coalesced into an irrefutable truth. But some features, such as

motivations, identity and values, can already be identified and analyzed, as is done in chapters 4 to 7.

The first theoretical influence of this thesis is owed to Berger and Luckmann and their Social Construction of Reality (1967). Their seminal work concentrated on the study of everyday life and how men's thoughts and actions originate from their subjective interpretation of a reality that seems to be commonsense, taken for granted, self-evident – to use some of their terms, and thus objectified (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 19-23). Everyday life occurs within an intersubjective world in which individuals are "continually interacting and communicating with others" (ibid, p. 23). The routines of that life are seldom put into question.

> But even the unproblematic sector of everyday reality is so only until further notice, that is, until its continuity is interrupted by the appearance of a problem. When this happens, the reality of everyday life seeks to integrate the problematic sector into what is already unproblematic. Commonsense knowledge contains a variety of instructions as to how this is to be done. (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 24)

While the authors did not refer to or use the term sensemaking, it will become clear when presenting the characteristics of that concept that the above quote essentially describes the sensemaking process.

2.3.1.2 PI as a sector

There exist multiple "finite provinces of meaning" in a society, spaces possessing their own reality, with specific rules, languages, and manners of interactions. But everyday life reality constitutes a "paramount reality [that] envelops them on all sides," even if they might provoke shifts within the lives of individuals, such as in the cases of religious experiences (ibid, pp. 25-26). Through social interactions, "everyday life is shared with others," especially in face-to-face situations. Interactions encompass individuals in our closest "inner circle" as well as those most remote from that circle, "highly anonymous abstractions." Together, they compose a social structure (ibid, pp. 28-33). In China, the social structure and order imposed by the party-state after the establishment of the PRC

in 1949 did not allow the preservation of any space for public interest initiatives not strictly organized by the authorities. Reforms began three decades later. Language is the most important way to make sense of "finite provinces of meaning" as well as of everyday life. It "is the most important sign system of human society," and thus the most important objectivation, i.e. "products of human activity that are available to both their producers and to other men as elements of a common world." It possesses the capacity "to crystallize and stabilize for me my own subjectivity," thus made more objectively available to each individual, and to transcend "spatial, temporal and social dimensions." It is through language that "immense edifices of symbolic representations" such as religion, art and science are constructed and, subsequently, the overall social stock of knowledge that binds a culture together. Each of us only possesses tiny bits of that overall stock of knowledge, those relevant to us due to our "immediate pragmatic interests" and our "general situation in society (ibid, pp. 34-45). PI constitutes such an edifice, made of a growing number of people and organizations. And PIPs, as the most active members of that edifice, are ideally placed to offer their specific narrative or "version of reality" (Shealy, 2016, p. 4).

2.3.2 Institutionalization and legitimation

Having laid the "foundations of knowledge in everyday life" in their first chapter, Berger and Luckmann detail their conceptions of institutionalization and legitimation, two of the most fundamental processes of human activities in any given society, and two processes closely related to the formation of a PI sector in China since the 1980s.

2.3.2.1 Institutionalization

According to Berger and Luckmann, "man constructs his own nature, or more simply, … man produces himself" (Berger & Luckmann, p. 49) through social interactions with significant others in particular and society in general. There would be no social order without human activity (ibid, pp. 49-52). "To understand the causes … for the emergence, maintenance and transmission of a

social order one must undertake an analysis that eventuates in a theory of institutionalization" (ibid, p. 52). Institutionalization results from habitualization, i.e. the frequent repetition of an action that turns in to a pattern easy to reproduce. It also narrows choices available to individuals, potentially opening up space for innovation in other areas (ibid, pp. 53-54). "Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution." Institutions are the products of a shared history that results from long developed patterns of habitualization. They "generally manifest themselves in collectivities containing considerable numbers of people" (ibid, p. 55) and are experienced by those collectivities "as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact" (ibid, p. 58).

This is happening today in China's PI sector. It has undergone an institutionalization process since the 1980s, with PIOs as its main organizational actors and PIPs its main individual actors. The members of this sector, even though it is divided in numerous sub-groups, possess a growing awareness of their existence as a group and seem to enjoy that sense of a growing community (Wu, 2017). This sense of community and the possible values associated with it constitute some of the areas that are investigated in this research, as they might be an important part of the motivations leading individuals to be involved in PI activities.

The emergence of the PI sector since the 1980s is thus one of institutionalization having already progressed to a considerable extent, especially considering how the concepts of *cishan*, charity or philanthropy, and *gongyi*, PI, had virtually disappeared from public view and public discourse after 1949. Several factors demonstrate the growing importance and gradual institutionalization of the PI sector. Among these are an expanding body of regulations, an increasing amount of organizations recognized as belonging to the PI sector, and an increasing number of volunteers and full-time practitioners. A new phenomenon must be added to these elements, i.e., the emergence of social enterprises that pursue PI objectives while adopting commercial business models.

2.3.2.2 Legitimation

Berger & Luckmann describe the process of legitimation, which follows institutionalization, "as a 'second-order' objectivation of meaning" which function "is to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the 'first-order' objectivations that have been institutionalized" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 92).

> Legitimation "explains" the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings. Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives. It is important to understand that legitimation has a cognitive as well as a normative element. In other words, legitimation is not just a matter of "values." It always implies knowledge as well. (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 93)

Berger & Luckmann insist on the fact that knowledge functions as a prerequisite for legitimation to occur, it "precedes 'values' in the legitimation of institutions" (ibid, p. 94). They identify four levels of legitimation, starting with "incipient legitimation," i.e. "a system of linguistic objectifications of human experience" that can be transferred to new members of the institution, and ending with symbolic universes, "bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality," symbolic referring "to realities other than those of everyday experience" (ibid, pp. 94-95). My assumption is that the PI sector, regulated by a set of laws, and with various types of organizations and a growing number of participants such as volunteers and full-time practitioners, has already progressed through three decades of institutionalization. But the eventual success of the legitimation process, still in its early stage, remains far from guaranteed. Different factors explain this situation, from governmental acceptance of PIOs' objectives to the general public's support for the role that the PI sector can play in Chinese society. Governmental acceptance remains dependent on local interpretations of the benefits of letting PIOs operate, and on what areas of activities are deemed acceptable or, on the contrary, sensitive. The boundaries between these interpretations vary in geographical and temporal terms. As three PIPs confided in 2013, they could be welcome and assisted in one county to aid ex-miners affected by pneumoconiosis, but a neighboring county could show a diametrically opposite attitude and forbid them to operate in that territory. They attributed such different receptions to the personalities of local political leaders

and their varying perceptions of the PI sector, sometimes considered a threat, sometimes a useful form of help. The argument has long been made that China's decentralization and its fragmented authoritarianism explain such different interpretations and reactions (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988).

Another theoretical argument can be advanced for the seemingly aleatory character of some local officials' acceptance of PI. As a recently emerged construct and a new social reality, PI has not yet crystallized. After no more than three decades of institutionalization, legitimation has not reached maturity, and the level of knowledge among social actors not directly involved in PI remains low. Chapter 7 demonstrates this state of affairs, which often poses problem for PIPs. Sensemaking constitutes a way not only to understand PIPs' motivations, but also how they come to terms with this situation.

2.3.3 Sensemaking as a theory

Sensemaking as a concept started to appear in communication-related fields in the late 1970s. Since then, a growing body of literature has referred to the term as a theoretical approach (Dervin & Naumer, 2009a, p. 876). The concept first appeared in fields concentrating on organizational communication, and audience and user studies. It goes far beyond a simple reference to sensory activity, it relates instead "to the interpretations or understandings resulting from cognitive processes" that integrate information and inputs from many sources over longer periods of time and "the making of sense through social interaction." Individual reflection, which plays an important role in sensemaking, includes cognition but also "emotions, intuitions, spiritual hunches, and other ways in which humans are assumed to make sense of their worlds, both internal and external". Sensemaking – which is either written with or without a hyphen depending on which field the concept is used – involves "processes of communicative engagement—intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, organizational, and societal" (ibid, p. 877).

2.3.3.1 Five theories of sensemaking

Dervin and Naumer identify five theories revolving around sensemaking/sense-making. One of them, Karl Weick's organizational studies' sensemaking, constitutes the foundation of this thesis' theoretical approach. The following section introduces the four other theories and the areas in which they have been developed, before analyzing Weick's understanding of sensemaking in detail. Sense-making has been an influential theory in library and information science (LIS) since the 1980s through the writings of Brenda Dervin and her sense-making methodology (SMM). Dervin emphasizes that research on communication should not focus on transmission, but rather on communication between individuals at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. SMM, first developed as a methodology, has become widely used by researchers in various fields as a theoretical approach. Dervin considers that

> … Sense-Making has been developed to stand "between the cracks" in multiple ways – between, for example, the artificial polarizations of quantitative versus qualitative, deductive versus inductive, prediction versus explanation, theoretic versus applied, contextual versus generalizable, random sampling versus judgmental sampling, modern versus post-modern, critical versus administrative, structure versus agency, stability versus change. (Dervin & Clark, 1999)

Dervin's sense-making approach does not distinguish between knowledge and information. It refers "to the making and unmaking of sense" and defines "information/knowledge as product of and fodder for sense making and sense unmaking". It views knowledge as "the sense made at a particular point in time-space by someone", a sense that might be shared and agreed upon by numerous people, that might enter into a formalized discourse and be published;

> sometimes it gets tested in other times and spaces and takes on the status of facts. Sometimes, it is fleeting and unexpressed. Sometimes it is hidden and suppressed. Sometimes, it gets imprimatured and becomes unjust law; sometimes it takes on the
> status of dogma. Sometimes it requires reconceptualizing a world. Sometimes it involves
> contest and resistance. Sometimes it involves danger and death. (Dervin, 1998, p. 36)

SSM does not only constitute a wide-encompassing approach, it also covers a lot of ground: Dervin advances that sense is made or unmade "at the juncture between self and culture, society, organization." (Dervin, 1998, p. 36)

The concept of sensemaking is also applied in the field of human-computer interaction (HCI), which is concerned with understanding how users search for meaning while navigating data bases to answer task-specific questions. Daniel Russell, one of the most prominent HCI scholars, argues that information retrieval "is useful when the main problem can be simply solved by looking up an answer, but it fails to characterize much of what we do when we seek information from documents", such as sampling information, understanding parts of it, organizing and recombining it in new ways, refining original goals, and possibly re-starting the whole process again.

> We use the term sensemaking to connote a view of information use larger than that normally associated with "information retrieval" and yet common to many tasks. In this view, information is not just retrieved but also reorganized to be used. We are interested in the performance of the larger sensemaking task, not just the performance of retrieval. (Russel & Stefik, 1993, p. 1)

Russell and other HCI scholars are interested, among others, in reducing the cost structure of the sensemaking process to improve individuals' ability to handle vast amounts of increasingly complex data. (Russel & Stefik, 1993, p. 34)
A third field of research that refers to sensemaking is cognitive systems engineering, a "discipline that uses analyses of work (practice, structure, purposes, and constraints) to inform the design of process and technology for human-system integration. It deals with socio-technical systems, where socio refers to the social processes of communication, cooperation, and competition" (Schwartz et al, 2008, p. 679). Gary Klein, a cognitive psychologist and the most recognized scholar using sensemaking in that field, favours the study of decision making in natural settings instead of through laboratory models. He finds the latter not to be useful to understand processes occurring under uncertainty conditions (Klein, 1998, p. 330; Klein, 2004, p. 352). A cognitive psychologist, his work concentrates on individual and team decision making. The objective of cognitive systems engineering is to analyze work-related aspects such as practice, structure, purposes, and constraints "to inform the design of technologies to better serve human needs." Klein

> does not want his approach to sense-making to be confused with a broad focus on how people make sense of experience. Rather, he defines sense-making as a purposive and ongoing effort to understand emerging connections and trajectories between people, places, and events so as to act effectively. His primary empirical method has focused on understanding what goes on inside people's heads—what

> they think and know, how they organize and structure information, and what they seek to make sense of. (Dervin & Naumer, 2009, p. 879)

Klein studies sensemaking at a macro-cognitive level, i.e., actors' views of and reactions to complex socio-technical systems "that undergo unexpected changes requiring revision of current understandings", not at micro-cognitive levels, i.e., the sequences of mental events (ibid, p. 879).

> By sensemaking, modern researchers seem to mean something different from creativity, comprehension, curiosity, mental modeling, explanation, or situational awareness, although all these factors or phenomena can be involved in or related to sensemaking. Sensemaking is a motivated, continuous effort to understand connections (which can be among people, places, and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively. (Klein et al, 2006, p. 71)

Sense-making has also been applied as a theoretical approach in the field of knowledge management by David Snowden. Like Weick, he focuses on decision making, strategy development and how to deal with complexity in organizational settings. Both scholars suggest that organizations should move away from top-down hierarchies and adopt flexible structures to respond to complex, changing and uncertain situations, and to improve organizational capacities (Browning & Boudes, 2005; Dervin et al, 2006). Snowden, who defines his project as naturalizing science-based approaches to decision theory and sense-making, develops and implements tools and practices used to analyze narrative complexity in real organizational settings (Dervin et al, 2006). Like Dervin, Snowden stresses "specific alternative procedures for organizational dialogue so as to enable more effective sense-making—making sense of the world in ways that allow more effective action" (Dervin & Naumer, 2009, p. 880). Snowden underscores the need for diverse views, i.e., different storytellings, for the possibility of narratives of what occurred, and what could have occurred, and for the necessary space to imagine alternatives for future actions (Browning & Boudes, 2005; Snowden, 2000, 2002; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

The fifth theory revolving around sensemaking stems from organizational studies. Developed by Karl Weick in his influential writings (1969, 1979, 1993, 1995), it "focuses on sense-making as a process involving how individuals in organizations comprehend, construct meaning, search for patterns, redress surprise, and interact with each other in pursuit of common understandings as a basis for organizational action" (Dervin & Naumer, 2009, p. 878). Weick pays

particular attention to high risk and complex situations in which organizations experience a collapse of sensemaking (e.g., Weick, 1993). Sensemaking is not outcome but process, a search for contexts within which small details fit together and make sense. It is concerned with how people "construct what they construct, why, and with what effects" (Weick, 1995). Weick's sensemaking will be presented in more details in the next section.

Although all the approaches introduced above display obvious differences, they also present commonalities.

> One characteristic that all the sense-making approaches have most in common is their interest in applying more humanistic ways of understanding human behavior to helping systems communicate more effectively. The second important manifestation of the turn toward sensemaking is the presence of substantial literatures emanating from five research communities. (Dervin & Naumer, 2009a, p. 878)

These commonalities comprise the following elements:

- All sensemaking theories pay a lot of attention to human factors and "more humanistic ways of understanding human behavior", as noted by Dervin and Naumer above. These different theories thus correspond or come close to the constructivist approach, the emphasis being placed on the participants and on the meanings that they ascribe to their realities.
- There is a recognition of the complexity, uncertainty, sometimes even chaos, of the settings in which these realities are being constructed, with no "bracketed absolute truth" or fixed state of affairs in sight.
- Facing uncertain situations lead individuals to revise their previous assumptions, thus reaching a new understanding.
- Information gathering and other sensemaking activities do not occur in predictable and structured ways.
- Making sense of uncertain situations is a social process in which interactions with other individuals plays an essential role. The emphasis lies more on the social than on the mental processes at work.
- Theoretical approaches trying to understand how decisions and knowledge are created out of such situations need to incorporate all these considerations.
- In most cases, the ways knowledge has traditionally been codified do not offer a holistic approach linking all these factors.

- All these theories adopt qualitative methods as part of their methodological toolkit.

The next sections delve in the different dimensions of Karl Weick's sensemaking, which constitutes the basis for the theoretical framework adopted in this research.

2.3.3.2 Weick's sensemaking in organizational studies

We have seen in the previous section how sensemaking has been applied in different fields. In organizational studies, sensemaking is instigated when a person or an organization identifies that their current understanding of events is inadequate (Klein, Moon, and Hoffman, 2006). Weick's approach (1969, 1979, 1993, 1995). has been further expanded by scholars such as van Dongen and Peverelli, who have mainly applied it to the organizational process in the corporate world, with a special focus on entrepreneurship, including Chinese entrepreneurship (e.g. Peverelli, 2005; Peverelli and Verduyn, 2012; Peverelli and Song, 2012).

> Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. Stated more compactly and more colorfully, "[S]ensemaking is a way station on the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action" (Taylor and Van Every 2000, p. 275).
> (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409)

An individual who makes the decision to be actively engaged in PI activities does not only want to make sense of new information. She intends to make sense of her social role and position, often in a way that contradicts established norms such as the pursuit of material security through a well remunerated professional occupation. Applying sensemaking to the study of PIPs' motivations aims at better understanding how these actors construct their identity and other related features, making sense of them as their engagement unfolds. PIPs not only

maintain PI as a specific social universe or reality, they also construct it as an institution.

2.3.3.3 Sensemaking as "an act of construal"

Sensemaking, as developed by Weick and other scholars of organizational studies, is well suited to the social constructivist approach delineated by Lincoln & Guba.

> I shall early on make the point that conceptual sense-making—what I call *developing a construction*—consists of the semiotic organization of terms and their interrelationships in ways that allow the constructor both to crystallize them in his or her own mind as well as to communicate them to others. Traditionally, science has sought to devise terms that correspond to (are isomorphic with) the presumptively *real* entities for which they stand. I prefer, as a constructivist, to think of a construction as little more than a metaphor, not for something "real," but as a way of making sense of something. (Lincoln & Guba, p. 29)

In the opening statements of his seminal book, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995), Weick warned about the relative vagueness of the term sensemaking. He suggested that it "is best described as a developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than as a body of knowledge." Sensemaking should be considered "an ongoing conversation" (Weick, 1995, p. xi), "a frame of mind about frames of mind that is best treated as a set of heuristics rather than as an algorithm" (ibid, p. xii). The same warning was issued by Lincoln and Guba (2013, p. 46): "Sense-making does not often take the form of clean, logical distinctions. The sense characterizations made of experienced phenomena are often 'fuzzy' in nature, as that term is used to describe 'fuzzy logic' by Kosko (1993)."

At the same time, sensemaking opens exploratory possibilities for researchers, a point emphasized by Lincoln & Guba:

> Sense-making is an effort by human beings, utilizing the constructive character of the mind and limited only by the imagination, to deal with confusion by means of a semiotic organization—an assemblage of signs and symbols, not only verbal but including many different forms of representation—that attaches meanings to "realized" elements [elements made real?] selectively abstracted from the otherwise confounded surround. (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 45)

Through sensemaking, individuals interpret events that they are instrumental in co-creating. "Sense-making is an act of construal" that orders seemingly

disorganized events and facts that can be "fitted into a larger conceptual structure, theory, discipline, or philosophy." Individuals are probably not conscious of the sensemaking process, which takes two forms: in its tacit, or unspoken form, it remains unarticulated, taken for granted; in its propositional form, it is made intelligible through language and symbols. Lincoln and Guba warn that "[I]n many instances, engaging in qualitative and constructivist work involves the difficult task of attempting to 'bring forth' the tacit by struggling to render such knowledge or understandings into words." However, no clear-cut and "logical distinctions" should be expected, as the researcher will struggle to explain "fuzzy" phenomena. He or she must strive to provide explanations while remembering that there is no objective truth or foundational reality, only symbols and meanings appropriated by individuals to make sense of their situations, the results of interactions between and among individuals and their environment. "… "reality," "truth" (including truth viewed as a "regulatory ideal"), and "fact" are all relative concepts—they are themselves semiotic signs that are relative to the person(s) who hold particular sense-makings, constructions, or meanings." There are no givens in the social world inhabited by individuals, only constructions that enable them to make sense of its constituent elements (ibid, pp. 45-51). Lincoln and Guba remind us that this relativity does not condone an "anything goes" attitude in terms of how the researcher proceeds, an issue that is addressed in the next chapter on methodology.

2.3.3.4 An interactive and ongoing process

Individual or collective identity construction requires social situations in which at least two actors interact. An idea of their own roles gradually emerges, shaped by what they think of themselves and what others think of them, the two inseparable sides of what constitutes the identity coin. There is no sensemaking without social interaction. Resulting communications with other actors lead to the construction of narratives through a process well described by Currie & Brown:

> These narratives, both individual and shared, are an evolving product of conversations within ourselves (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.106) and with others (Heidegger, 1949, p.278). Ours, thus, is a view of identity in which our internal soliloquies of self are intimately linked to the stories of others who have lived, live now, and will live in the future (Bruner,

> 1991, p.19-20; Burke, 1968, p.16; Bakhtin, 1986). Such a perspective suggests that narrative "is a kind of cognitive and cultural ether that permeates and energizes everything that goes on" (Pentland, 1999, p.712; Foucault, 1977).
> (Currie, G., & Brown, A. D., 2003, p. 5)

Sensemaking, similarly to organizing and interacting, is an ongoing process in which actors react to but also shape the environments that confront them. Their actions and reactions to other (re)actions constitute projections onto their environment in a continuing feedback process. "The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). During this ongoing process, actors extract cues from their environment to help them choose information deemed relevant and explanations judged acceptable (Salancick & Pfeffer, 1978). Extracted cues are "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (Weick, 1995, p. 50). They constitute points of reference linked to larger networks of meaning. Since actors face overwhelming flows of information, only a limited number of cues can be perceived and registered. In order to decide which cues to extract when encountering situations in the present, actors rely on their past experience. Sensemaking thus relies on a retrospective of what has been noticed and deemed important. Any event perceived as bringing major changes to their environment requires comprehending the new situation; in organizing terms, in such a state of affairs actors need to engage in a renewed effort of equivocality reduction and "adapt their reality construct to the new environment" (Peverelli & Verduyn, 2012, p. 24). Between accuracy and plausibility, people opt for the latter (Currie & Brown, 2003) as it allows them to minimize effort: "in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help, either" (Weick, 1995, p. 61).

The above, mainly derived from Weick (1993, 1995), Sutcliffe & Obstfeld (2005), and Peverelli & Verduyn (2012), is summarized by Weick in *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Weick attributes seven properties to sensemaking (1995, pp. 18-61):

> l. Identity: The recipe is a question about who I am as indicated by discovery of how and what I think.
>
> 2. Retrospect: To learn what I think, I look back over what I said earlier.
>
> 3. Enactment: I create the object to be seen and inspected when I say or do something.
>
> 4. Social: What I say and single out and conclude are determined by who socialized me and how I was socialized, as well as by the audience I anticipate will audit the conclusions I reach.
>
> 5. Ongoing: My talking is spread across time, competes for attention with other ongoing projects, and is reflected on after it is finished, which means my interests may already have changed.
>
> 6. Extracted cues: The "what" that I single out and embellish as the content of the thought is only a small portion of the utterance that becomes salient because of context and personal dispositions.
>
> 7. Plausibility: I need to know enough about what I think to get on with my projects, but no more, which means sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy.
>
> (Weick, 1995, pp. 61-62)

All seven aspects are intertwined as individuals interpret events. Their interpretations become evident through narratives – written and spoken – which convey the sense they have made of events (Currie & Brown, 2003). Identity is probably the most important of all attributes, the one most directly influenced by sensemaking. Drawing from Crowley (2003, pp. 40-50) and her application of sensemaking to a voluntary nonprofit association in the United States, I quickly review the concept of identity in the following section.

2.3.3.5 Identity

For Weick, identity constitutes the first property of sensemaking. Pratt considers identity to be the "lens through which sensemaking occurs" (Pratt et al., 2001), the foundation that helps individuals and groups to interpret who they are when faced with a task (Pratt, 2000, p. 14). As a social construction, identity results from but is also sustained through interaction with other individuals (Weick, 1995; Giddens, 1993).

Identity categories include personal, social and organizational types. Social identities are often associated with features such as gender, race, religious affinities, or membership in associations. Individuals can (re)construct these features and thus change them (Pratt et al., 2001). Identification with a social

group allows an individual to partake of the accomplishments of that group (Bhattcharya et al., 1994).

Personal identity results from the combination of social identity classifications and individual characteristics such as interests and abilities. Joining a new organization or social group leads to the construction of additional identities, which enables individuals to comprehend who they are and what their role is in the entity they have joined (Pratt et al., 2001). Identifying with an organization may lead to that role becoming part of one's personal identity (Levine & Moreland, 1994). How much an individual is committed to an organization is related to how deeply she values her relationships in that organization.

Organizational identity, as suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985), depends on what members believe is "central, enduring and distinctive about their organization's character" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 63). Like individual identity, it evolves through interaction with others (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 273). An individual may have multiple identities due to her membership in different organizations, leading to more flexibility but also resulting in more complexity in terms of identity management. Tensions may also appear between personal and organizational identities if these are not aligned (Brown et al., 2001).

Multiple identities are a common feature for individuals, groups and organizations (Gioia et al., 2000; Pratt et al., 2001), who can draw from "multiple work-related identities (e.g. professional and organizational) to facilitate sensemaking" (Pratt et al., 2001, p. 1).

While identity is usually considered to be stable (Gioia et al., 2000; Weick, 1995), it is also recognized that identity may change due to external stimuli or in response to a planned decision (Gioia et al., 2000): "organizational identity, contrary to most treatments of it in the literature, is actually relatively dynamic and the apparent durability of identity is somewhat illusory" (pp. 63-64). This results in a paradox, since durability is needed for long-term success (Albert & Whetten, 1985), but quick adaptability is also required for survival, especially at the organizational level (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Gustafson & Reger, 1995).

A possible way around that paradox has been suggested by Gioia et al. (2000) with the concept of adaptive instability, that offers continuity around central

values and beliefs while allowing a dynamic and changing interpretation of these values and beliefs.

> Continuity is reassuring to members and to external constituents who can say that their mission or central values stay consistent over time, but that the representation and translations into action take different forms over time (Crowley, 2003, pp. 50-51).

To summarize, sensemaking kicks in when individuals encounter events that do not fit into their understanding of the environment they live in to such an extent that simply dismissing these events will not suffice. Signals indicating discrepancies with what is supposed to be normal are identified and conjectures begin to be formulated to make sense of these discrepancies. The next step consists of making the noted divergences public, which could amount to a publication in a scientific journal in an academic environment or reports and discussions through media channels. As a result, the issue becomes public and visible, something that wasn't previously the case. This latter stage, according to Weick, does not necessarily draw public attention and recognition. It does constitute an episode of sensemaking that leads to publicly sharing "anomalies" and, possibly, to a more sensible understanding of the unusual (Weick, 1995, pp. 2-3). Inclusions in different social groups are one of the most enabling ways of making sense of such "anomalies."

I apply sensemaking to understand the motivations of PIPs engaging in PI activities. My objective is first to learn what PIPs think about their participation, how they explain it in retrospect when they consider their past involvement. And second, how they construct PI as a concept and whether they recognize changes in the way their interpretation has evolved. This is an endeavor that aims to better comprehend their identity, how they make sense of their involvement, but the implications for PI as a construct and as a sector.

2.3.4 Axiological concern

Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of values. But organizational sensemaking does not usually comprise the study of values. I suggest it

constitutes a helpful addition to that approach, even if scholars have struggled to provide a clear definition. Wilson noted four decades ago that

> There is no single accepted definition for the concept "value" in the social sciences. Values have been variously defined as "affectively toned fixations," as prescriptive or proscriptive beliefs or as "abstract ideals, positive or negative, not tied to any specific attitude object or situation, representing a person's beliefs about ideal modes of conduct and ideal terminal goals." (Wilson, 1979, p. 2)

Almost four decades later, the term remains difficult to pin down. Cieciuch et al. remark that there is still no consensus about its precise meaning, "value" often being used interchangeably with other terms such as "belief" or "attitude," as noted by Rokeach (1972, p. x). Some of the most influential theories of the psychology of values stem from Allport (Allport & Vernon, 1931), Rokeach (1973), and Schwartz (1992, 1994). Allport and Vernon's theory revolved around a psychology of personality. Rokeach wanted to advance the understanding of individual and group differences in attitudes and behavior. Schwartz aimed to integrate previous approaches to facilitate further research in the field of values. Various typologies have been proposed by scholars, an early example being Spranger (1914), who influenced Allport and Vernon (1931, 1951) with his six personality types (theoretical, economic, aesthetic, religious, social and political), one dominant and the others subordinate in each individual's personality (Cieciuch, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2015, p. 41).

2.3.4.1 Why values matter

The term "value" belongs to these taken-for-granted concepts we deal with in our daily life, a concept that has also provided abundant materials to social scientists:

> … value statements, these axiological beliefs regulate our social life. They are a basic ingredient of our personal identity. For this reason, values have always been a central topic of philosophy and of the social sciences, even before the word value itself was popularized in this sense, under Nietzsche's influence notably. Why do such and such people think that "X is fair, good, etc. …? (Boudon, 2013, p. 1)

While defining "value" has proven difficult, some features have been consistently associated with the concept.

> [Values] are particular types of cognitions that are organized in a consistent pattern, have an evaluative quality, refer to desirable end-states, and imply choice and action. (Wilson, 1979, p 2)

Value is widely used in different disciplines. Unlike "attitudes," which is mainly the domain of psychology and sociology, fields of study such as philosophy, political science, economics, education, sociology and psychology all consider values as an important concept. According to Rokeach, values

> have to do with modes of conduct and end-states of existence. To say that a person "has a value" is to say that he has an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally and socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct or end-states of existence. (Rokeach, 1972, pp. 159-160)

Rokeach constitutes the most important influence on my understanding of the concept of value. He argues that it should "occupy the central position" of psychological research. The first reason he advances is its dynamic character, which, among others, possesses "a strong motivational component." The fact that "value is a determinant of attitude as well as behavior" constitutes the second argument. Third, he proposes that since "a person possesses considerably fewer values than attitudes," it makes the concept of value "a more economical analytic tool for describing and explaining similarities and differences between persons, groups, nations, and cultures." (Rokeach, 1972, pp. 157-158)

2.3.4.2 Related to action

A value can be internalized, becoming "a standard or criterion for guiding action, for developing and maintaining attitudes toward relevant objects and situations, for justifying one's own and others' actions and attitudes, for morally judging self and others, and for comparing self with others" (Rokeach, 1972, p. 160). Internalization is not necessarily a conscious process, but the result turns a value into a criterion, possibly even a standard, that guides action. That standard has the potential "to influence the values, attitudes, and actions of at least some others" (ibid). In his definition, Kluckhohn proposes that a value is

> [a] conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action. Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395)

Rokeach assimilates a value to a single belief providing guidance to actions and judgments. That belief would apply “across specific objects and situations, and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states of existence.” Unlike an attitude, he considers value to be an imperative to action, “a standard or yardstick to guide actions, attitudes, comparisons, evaluations, and justifications of self and others” (Rokeach, 1972, p. 160).

2.3.4.3 A working definition

Rokeach makes three basic assumptions. He considers that some beliefs are more important than others; that the possibility for a belief to change diminishes with its importance; but that a central belief experiencing changes would affect the whole belief system. He then advances his understanding of value. This understanding constitutes a working definition that is implied when discussing that concept in this thesis.

> I consider a value to be a type of belief, centrally located within one’s total belief system, about how one ought or ought not to behave, or about some end-state of existence worth or not worth attaining. Values are thus abstract ideals, positive or negative, not tied to any specific attitude object or situation, representing a person’s beliefs about ideal modes of conduct and ideal terminal goals—what Lovejoy (1950) calls generalized adjectival and terminal values. Some examples of ideal modes of conduct are to seek truth and beauty, to be clean and orderly, to behave with sincerity, justice, reason, compassion, humility, respect, honor, and loyalty. Some examples of ideal goals or end-states are security, happiness, freedom, equality, ecstasy, fame, power, and states of grace and salvation. A person’s values, like all beliefs, may be consciously conceived or unconsciously held, and must be inferred from what a person says or does. (Rokeach, 1972, p. 124)

In this thesis, I infer PIPs’ values from their narratives shared during interviews and other exchanges. But my purpose does not lie in establishing a typology of values, or in contributing to the advancement of our theoretical understanding of the concept of value per se. My goal is exploratory in nature and consists of identifying some of the values that constitute the foundations of PIPs’ motivations or result from their engagement. Whether the individuals who participated in this research brought these values in their PI engagement or whether they gradually developed these values is not a question I intend to answer. The fundamental point here lies in the existence of these values and how

they are integrated by PIPs in their way of thinking about PI. I consider ideal modes of conduct and/or ideal goals or end-states--what Rokeach called instrumental values and terminal values--as equally important in this research.

2.4 Hypotheses and research questions

Having presented in this chapter the theoretical framework and the concepts I have adopted for this research, I formulate below a few hypotheses on which this thesis rests, followed by the main research question and several related sub-questions that have animated the whole project.

2.4.1 Hypotheses

- The civil society framework is a problematic theoretical framework that is not well suited to understanding the motivations of PIPs in China.
- PI engagement constitutes a sensemaking undertaking that helps individuals to process a complex – and sometimes painful – reality. That reality either stopped making sense, never made much sense or gained some sense in the process of PI engagement – even in some cases when PIPs had never reflected about that sense before their PI engagement.
- During that process, identity features can be recognized, and some central values identified.
- PI, as a construct, offers a new understanding of the reasons a growing number of individuals engages in social organizations.

2.4.2 Research question and sub-questions

(1) Why do individuals become involved in public interest activities? What are the motivations driving individuals to become and remain engaged in public interest activities?

(2) How does participation in public interest activities constitute a sensemaking process for public interest practitioners?

The following sub-questions are related to both main questions:

- What are the features of PIPs' identities?
- How do they construct their identities?
- What values can be identified among PIPs?
- How do the constructed identities of PIPs and their values influence our understanding of PI?
- How does the individual sensemaking process and the identity and values constructed through that process affect the whole PI sector? I.e., what are the implications of PIPs' motivations for the PI sector?

Most of my attention is devoted to professional full-time practitioners who have opted to work in the PI sector and to individuals whose commitment to PI activities cannot be understood as volunteering, i.e. where the separation between professional and volunteer engagement is blurred. I address these questions in chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, after detailing in the next chapter the methodology I have applied to this research.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology & Participant Introduction

> The strategy I espouse bears some relationship to "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and is a form of "exploratory" analysis (Gerring 2001: 231–232). It is a modest enterprise that accepts (even revels in the fact) that the best generalizations are usually bounded. It encourages us to shop for existing theories and concepts before and after we head to the field, but not to buy much of what we find (Jones 1974: 219), especially when interviews make it clear that our preconceived notions have led us to miss the real question or imagine a dilemma that does not exist. This strategy treats research design as an ongoing process and emphasizes discovery rather than verification (Gerring 2001; Glazer and Strauss 1967). It attaches considerable importance to the subjective experience of interviewees (Schwartz 1996: 107) and regards shoehorning evidence into "ill-fitting a priori categories" (Gerring 2001: 231; also, Glaser and Strauss 1967: 253) to be just about the greatest sin imaginable. (O'Brien, 2006, p. 28)

In this chapter, I present a methodology resulting from changes that occurred in the field and led me to revise my original plans. I first review how the field of my research has evolved during a process spanning three years and three stages, the types of data I have collected and the approaches I have adopted to analyze these data. Then I elaborate on my position in this research and the "self" I bring into the project, I discuss issues related to translations, and how I relied on participants' narratives to understand their PI engagement. In the last section, I present the individuals who participated in this research.

3.1 Evolution of the field

The field, while evolving, retained a certain consistency between early 2014 and the end of 2016. The research covered a period of three years comprising three stages. The first period consisted in interviewing a few individuals and attending different events. These events took place in a few Chinese cities and were mainly related to the Free Lunch initiative, such as the anniversaries of its launch; gatherings in which Free Lunch volunteers were celebrated; preparation work for Sept. 9, Charity Day (*gongyi ri*) in China; and interactions of Guangzhou volunteers through a WeChat group and the impact of these interactions on the construction of a collective identity. During the second period, the focus was

placed on an ethnographic study of staff members of various initiatives grouped under the banner of "Union of Rural Children Commonweal Organisations in China," (hereafter the Union) whose leader is Deng Fei, the charismatic founder of Free Lunch, based in Hangzhou. The objective was to observe team members working for other projects than Free Lunch. The Union had launched a total of fourteen projects by the end of 2016, including Free Lunch. The third period marked a broadening of the field in geographical terms, but a limitation in the methodological sense, with an enhanced focus on interviewing professional PI practitioners, most of whom were not employed by Free Lunch or other initiatives of the Union.

The main reason for the changes presented above lay in the preliminary research objectives. The motivations of professionals and volunteers of the PI sector only constituted one half of the original project. The second part was intended to comprehend how some PIPs act as boundary spanners, cooperating with other social actors such as government officials, media workers, entrepreneurs, celebrities and volunteers to solve social problems. Apart from the unrealistic scope of the project, I also met some difficulties during fieldwork, which led to a salutary revision of the original goals. As a result, I re-focused my attention on PI participation as a sensemaking process for PIPs.

3.1.1 First stage: a few interviews and events' ethnography

The first period started in early 2014, after the Ph.D. proposal had been drafted but without a clear understanding of the fieldwork I was planning. I had devised a few questions revolving around the activities of the few individuals I had the opportunity to interview. Questions about their family histories, upbringing, choice of studies and career were gradually added as the project progressed. These encounters were exploratory investigations intended to help me in improving future interviews and to test if respondents were willing to delve into their personal stories.

3.1.1.1 The first interviews

The earliest interviews I did with the consciousness of gathering materials for this Ph.D. project occurred in early 2014 (Chapter 5). They followed earlier interviews of Deng Fei, regrouped as one for convenience in Table 1. The idea was to become familiar with a few persons who had made PI an essential part of their lives, as professionals, volunteers or SE workers, even if I had not yet established a clear distinction between these three types of actors. These early interviews are numbered 1 through 5 in appendix 1.

3.1.1.2 Observing a few events

My entry point into the PI sector had been my interest in the very first action launched by Deng Fei, Fight Child Trafficking. It was also the reason I interviewed him in September 2012 for my master's thesis. I quickly learned of the other actions he had launched or co-launched, especially the most publicly visible, Free Lunch (FL). Almost all events I attended in the first period of fieldwork were related to FL. They included celebrations such as the Annual Appreciation Party of the Guangzhou volunteers in January 2015, the fourth anniversary of the action's launch in April 2015, a meeting to prepare PI Day in August 2015, a best practice training, and a press conference announcing the launch of an online platform devoted to linking social actors involved in PI projects.

I attended these events to witness interactions between different social actors, such as volunteers, media workers, businesspersons, possibly officials, celebrities, etc. I intended to gather data and contacts for my second research objective. Even though I abandoned that purpose in the first half of 2016, some of the contacts I established with participants of these events allowed me to later meet PI practitioners and pursue the first research objective. Participants attending these events also offered some glimpses into the motivations of PI volunteers. One example of such an event is presented below.

Figure 1
Volunteers show the way

Annual Appreciation Party of the Guangzhou volunteers (January 2015). This was a sophisticated event demonstrating the organizational capability of FL. Volunteers placed outside of the event's premises indicated the direction and welcomed participants (Figure 1). The event took place in an auditorium where experienced hosts, both professional and amateur, animated the event (Figure 2). Closely associated to FL, Deng Fei appeared on stage to acknowledge the contribution of the Guangzhou-based volunteers and their practices. He also thanked corporate partners (Figure 3) and media for their support. Volunteers shared the reasons they supported the initiative (figures 4 and 5).

Figure 2 – Experienced hosts animate the event

Figure 3 – Corporate partners are thanked

Figures 4 and 5 – Volunteers receiving an award and sharing their feelings about Free Lunch

Figure 6 – Deng Fei kissing an item to be auctioned

Figure 7 – A calligrapher performing with two hands

The primus inter pares of attending companies donating to Free Lunch was a local bank. It provided its facilities and was given about twelve minutes to showcase its cooperation with the initiative and its approval of Free Lunch's aims and procedures, including transparency.

The last part of the event mixed entertainment and functionality, with an auction of various donated items (Figure 6), including a work created on the stage by a calligrapher painting with both hands (Figure 7). Auctions occurred in a couple of the other events I attended in 2015, including that same day in a luxury hotel with hundreds of guests. Concerts were also part of the entertainment activities, such as at the end of a day of celebration for the fourth anniversary of Free Lunch launch in April 2015.

3.1.2 Second stage: ethnographic study focused on the Union

The second period began in early March 2016 and lasted two months, in which, apart from a few days in April, I lived in an apartment shared by a few staff members of the Union. I shared their daily office routine and meals, and participated in a few outings that can be regarded as team-building activities.

I made precious contacts at the Union's HQ which proved very helpful for the development of my research. One was Shang Fuwen, who welcomed me on the day of my arrival at the Union and became my roommate for the next two months. We extensively discussed his ideas about his work, the Union and the PI sector. My time at the Union's HQ allowed me to weave interesting links with some members of the staff and to ask several PIPs whether they would agree to being interviewed. I formally interviewed six of them in the following months, including Shang Fuwen. I had already interviewed two in the first stage of my fieldwork. Many discussions took place that provided food for thought; but after a month, I started to question the relevance of staying for another few months, which had been my original intention. One major reason convinced me to extend my fieldwork beyond the Union. I abandoned the second objective of my original plan that revolved around interactions between PI practitioners and other social actors. Since my main objective in staying at the Union lay in observing such interactions and following individuals acting as boundary spanners between

different social fields, the more restricted orientation required a change of plan. Following boundary spanners such as Deng Fei had also proved more difficult than I had anticipated. While acquiescing to my request to travel along with him and attend meetings he held during his business trips, he occasionally expressed reluctance to have someone not formally belonging to the Union constantly attending his meetings. I hypothesized the actual reasons without directly asking him. I neither wanted nor tried to force his hand. I was eager to preserve a good relationship and to ensure that my insistence would not lead to cutting further access.

Another reason for extending the scope of my research originated in discussions with PI practitioners working at the Union. Deng Fei's charismatic personality was regularly mentioned as a factor that had led some of them to work with him. While this constitutes a perfectly acceptable reason for working in an organization, I suspected that this element would not apply to most PIPs active in other organizations. Finally, in a similar vein, some of the Union's projects such as FL, through savvy usage of media resources throughout China, achieved a level of visibility that very few PIOs can match. Providing a measurable criterion to sustain that claim might be difficult, but several of the participants I interviewed outside the Union, hearing that my entry point in the PI sector had been Deng Fei and his organization, insisted that they "could not compare to him" (*bu neng gen ta bi*) in terms of prominence and visibility. The yearly donations received by a popular (*minjian*[12]) initiative such as FL stand in a category of their own. Between April 2011 and the end of March 2018, these donations amounted to 401 million RMB (mianfeiwucan.org). According to one participant, the initiative targeted donations of over 80 million RMB for the year 2017, later achieving its target.

To summarize, it is probably accurate to say that the Union, with FL as its flagship project, while not constituting an outlier in the PI sector, represents an

[12] *minjian* is translated in English by 'folk,' 'civil,' 'among the people,' 'popular' or 'non-governmental.' The term can be misunderstood as a politically connotated word that places the people in a position of opposition, or at least counterbalance to the government. In the course of this research, the meaning attributed to that term in most cases is civil or civic. It does not convey a notion of opposition to the authorities. It signifies an initiative stemming from individuals, groups, or organizations that are not directly under the authority of governmental or party institutions. But a caveat is necessary though, as clear boundaries are often hard to draw when it comes to governmental influence.

unusual case in terms of human, social and financial capital. This explains why the field was extended to different organizations and sites, a practice that "focuses on similarities across field sites … (i)nstead of studying variations across a number of cases and controlling for variables" (Heimer, 2006, p. 58).

3.1.3 Third stage: interviews in multiple sites

The extension of the field occurred not so much in a geographical sense as in the number of new organizations I contacted. At the same time, I drew from a narrower methodological toolbox, squarely placing the emphasis on interviewing professional PIPs. Among the nineteen persons interviewed during that third and last stage in five different cities, one was based in Hangzhou but involved in several of the Union's initiatives, a second worked as local manager of FL in Hunan, and five supported other Union projects. The last twelve participants did not have any relationship with the Union and its actions.

Stating accurately how many PI organizations these practitioners represented at the time of our communications, which were often not limited to the interviews, constitutes a rather tricky exercise. Twenty-seven respondents had only been involved in one PIO by the time the interviews were conducted, but things were more complicated for another ten persons, who mentioned more than one entity as an important part of their past practice. Six had been involved in two organizations that constructed their experiences as PI practitioners, and one respondent, my roommate during the second stage, had participated in at least three. Of the remaining three individuals, two were the founders of their organizations, with fourteen projects launched or co-launched by Deng Fei, the participation of Hu Yihua in several of the Union's actions – he could not say himself for sure – and four actions started by Yu Jianrong. Apart from these three individuals, the other thirty-four practitioners represented over twenty entities. Four of these entities were social enterprises. The motivations of these four individuals for working in these organizations were intimately connected to their prior PI experience. This element, added to the fact that individuals and not organizations constitute the unit of analysis of this research, led me to include them as valid respondents.

Appendix 1 provides an overview of the thirty-seven interviewees. This includes the PI areas in which they were active, their roles, whether they remained in the same organization or had left it by May 2017, and if they were still active in the PI sector. Only one had left the PI sector by that time. The table also indicates the type of data I collected, thanks to their participation. Date ranges show when I started to communicate with each PIP and whether this communication was extended beyond the time of the interview. The absence of range means that the interview constitutes the only data I obtained from the participant.

3.2 Data selection

3.2.1 Unit of analysis

I concentrated on a single type of unit of analysis, namely individuals, i.e. PIPs. Unsurprisingly, there was often a correlation between the practitioners' level of seniority and their ability to reflect on their PI involvement. I initially favored mainly selecting senior members during fieldwork, but I gradually decided to let a random selection occur as I was encountering more practitioners at the Union and in other organizations. Including more senior practitioners would have skewed the data on the side of a higher age average, which would not match my experience in the field. The fact that seniority often bears little relation to age constituted another factor that convinced me not to concentrate more on senior practitioners. A substantial proportion of PI practitioners were in their twenties, e.g. university students in their final years in the case of volunteers and some of their peers who have freshly graduated and opted for the PI sector. Among the 37 individuals listed in Table 1, 18 were in their twenties, 11 were between thirty and thirty-nine, five in their forties and only three in their fifties. I am not aware of statistics that would allow comparing these figures with the overall situation of the PI sector in China, but my non-statistical impression is that the prevalence of respondents in their twenties matches the realities I encountered in the field.

3.2.1.1 Length of participation

I focused on individuals who had been involved in PI for at least three years up to the time they became part of this project. This increased the odds that, a) their involvement was not motivated by short-term interest, b) they had had time to reflect on the reasons of their participation and how they had evolved since early days, and c) data obtained from these individuals, although not resulting from a longitudinal study, shed a diachronic light on their motives. Among the 37 individuals I interviewed, three expressed varying degrees of refusal of the PIP label (represented by red dots in Table 1). One, Bei Peng, had left the sector and expressed his sense of release at having turned the page.

3.2.1.2 Quantity of selected individuals

Since this project abides by the principles of qualitative research, it follows the concept of saturation, which suggests ending the collection of new data when it does not lead to the obtention of new insights into the issue being investigated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This is an acceptable practice since "qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements" (Mason, 2010). It is also a convenient way of hiding the fact that establishing a concrete number of participants is problematic to say the least. It constitutes an issue upon which no agreement has ever been reached in the academic community (Mason, 2010, p. 1320). As Baker and Edwards (2012) argue, advancing a theoretical number that would correspond to saturation "is a moot point." Instead, they advance a range of suggestions gathered from other scholars to guide qualitative researchers, proposing that "answers are dependent upon one's methodological and epistemological perspective" (Baker & Edwards, 2012, pp. 4-5).

I originally planned to conduct thirty in-depth interviews to obtain valuable insights into PI engagement and its potential sensemaking elements. In the end, thirty-seven interviews were conducted, spanning from one to four hours. The shortest ones were related to the study of Guangzhou's chapter of the FL WeChat group. However, the analysis of eight months of discursive requests and the ensuing conversations having occurred in that group, coupled with follow-up

communications with several of its eight key members more than compensated for this relative short length.

3.2.1.3 Access to PI practitioners

Once I had decided not to extend my research to individuals I identified as boundary spanners between different social fields, the difficulty of gaining access to this type of actors disappeared. I only met one individual who refused to be interviewed and asked me not to record our informal discussion. The thirty-seven individuals listed in Table 1, as well as most other individuals I met who were engaged in PI, granted unfettered access and views on their PI involvement. Some expressed surprised at arousing the interest of a researcher, because they thought they had nothing of value to say. Some mentioned that they had never reflected before in a conscious way about their motivations for being active in the PI sector. But the issue of obtaining access to participants did not pose a challenge.

WeChat facilitated the process of contacting and communicating with PIPs and other individuals I met during my research. The business card function allows a contact to be sent instantly to another contact, making it extremely easy to link with another person. The individual who requests to be added as a new contact has the option of writing a sentence to present herself. In my case, I introduced myself as a Hong Kong Polytechnic University researcher working on PIPs' motivations. The receiving party never refused my request and it sometimes led to more formal exchanges such as an interview. WeChat did not only offer facility of use, it also constituted part of the field, as I regarded my exchanges with PI practitioners through that channel as constituting part of our interactions. I recorded some conversations through screenshots, but I also used WeChat to maintain contact with respondents, for example, when I sent them the interview transcripts, usually accompanied by a second document that included a few supplementary questions and their personal information summarized in two tables; or when I had questions to which I needed a quick answer. In other words, my field included both online and offline spaces, in a way that I have not epistemologically distinguished. As the research project gradually advanced,

especially following the study of the WeChat group in Guangzhou, I came to find such a distinction increasingly irrelevant. WeChat, probably more than any other social media in China, is so deeply embedded in the lives of the PI practitioners in communication, organizational and emotional terms, that it constitutes part of a hybrid space comprising both online and offline constituents (Barnes, 2008, Ruelle & Peverelli, 2017).

3.3 Data collection

I described above how I conducted observations and interviews in the different stages of my fieldwork. It has been well documented that the field presents many challenges unforeseen during the planning phase (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). I compare below the original design with what occurred in the field and which adjustments were made.

3.3.1 Ethnography

3.3.1.1 Participant-observation

When I started the first stage of my fieldwork, or "pre-official fieldwork" from an administrative perspective, my purpose was of an exploratory nature. I intended to make contacts, probe the atmosphere of the events and take notes about what occurred on- and off-stage. I engaged some participants in discussions and offered them my business card – or rather my WeChat number, as business cards have become almost irrelevant outside a business context. But my behavior lay more on the observation than on the participatory side of ethnography. The second stage of fieldwork proved more complex. I considered participant-observation to observe PI practitioners and interactions between different actors related to the Union. But I was unsure about an active participation. Experiences of the first stage had made clear that observing required full attention. Second, there also existed a risk of being drawn into an advocacy role. Third, I felt empathy for the general objectives of the PI practitioners and the social issues they addressed, and sympathy with them as

individuals. Robert K. Yin draws attention to these three issues regarding participant-observation (Yin, 2009). He adds a fourth: the physical dispersion of the organization or social group being studied (ibid, p. 96), a point that applied to my research, particularly in the final stage of fieldwork. A final reason for caution is that it can be "argued that both elements of participant-observation make it impossible to achieve dialogue; to do so involves outlining and arguing our opinions and judgments together with the people whom we research, even if this sometimes leads to disagreement" (Herold, 2000, p. 1). As I already mentioned, I at least once consciously avoided pushing a request, trying to avoid provoking a negative reaction that could interfere with the level of goodwill I was encountering.

One instance of how the participant and observation elements have the potential to come into conflict was illustrated by Deng Fei's requirement that I give a presentation about… giving a presentation at the Union. Hearing that I had been a communication trainer before starting a Ph.D., he asked me to train his staff to improve their presentation skills. I was surprised, then confronted with the consequences of this demand. On the one hand, I felt it would present me with an opportunity to give back something to the Union's members, who had offered their hospitality and had granted me access to their daily working realities. On the other hand, as I knew from my prior professional experience, it would require preparation and concentration leaving less room for observation related to my research. How could I possibly refuse to provide some support? I did present some principles of good presentation, which was followed by a presentation delivered by a staff member. My thinking was that it would allow me to engage him and other members in a discussion about possible improvements. While his presentation provided information and updates of the Union's latest initiatives, the discussion was cut short by Deng Fei. He was the first to comment, which cut short the interaction I intended to generate with other persons attending the session. This episode constituted one of many elements leading me to the conclusion that I should, a) extend the scope of my fieldwork beyond the Union, and b) concentrate more on interviews than participant-observation.

3.3.1.2 Interviews

To inquire about the subjective meaning of practitioners' participation in PI initiatives, I relied mainly on semi-structured interviews or non-schedule standardized interviews. This allowed me to loosen the structure depending on the situation.

> Semistructured interviews are conducted on the basis of a loose structure consisting of open ended questions that define the area to be explored, at least initially, and from which the interviewer or interviewee may diverge in order to pursue an idea in more detail. (Britten, 2005, p. 251)

The earliest interviews I conducted started as unstructured discussions. While I felt that unstructured discussion would provide more in-depth insights, it sometimes degenerated into fuzzy exchanges that failed to yield such results and imposed some of my assumptions on the interviewees. I realized this later when I listened to the interview recordings.

Semi-structured interviews rely on the assumption that language and the order of questions can be adapted to different interviewees, but that the questions remain similar. This offers the possibility of comparing results (Denzin, 1978, pp. 115-116). Semi-structured, however, is not synonymous with lack of flexibility. Details or stories that did not immediately seem to bear a relationship with my research interests proved invaluable. These little diversions did not always yield interesting outcomes, but they did bring in unexpected results that showed the benefit of listening patiently. This does not amount to Frank Pieke's (2000) suggestion "that we integrate serendipity – defined as the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident – into the design of projects," a practice that "creates enough opportunity for the unexpected to happen" (2000, pp. 45-46) (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006, p. 17). What seemed like digressions at first sight sometimes turned into emotional stories opening the door to intimate experiences and thoughts. These stories, as with other elements of the interviewing process, sometimes posed challenges I had to cope with, not always in an ideal way.

Getting personal. Interviewing was a learning process that required adjustments. If time allowed, I usually spent the first part of the interview asking questions about the participant's childhood and youth. No individual refused to answer

these questions. Some went much further than I had anticipated, crying or expressing sadness as they remembered painful experiences, complicated family relations or episodes deemed highly unfair. As time passed and I neared the end of my fieldwork, it became clear that unless I adopted a strictly psychological approach, for which I am not trained, these intimate details might not provide cues to explain PIPs' motivations. I continued to ask questions about participants' childhoods because it created very positive rapports with them, allowing them to enter a narrative mood. Participants told interesting stories, some included dramatic episodes which I found highly poignant. In such cases, I had to struggle with my own emotions and try to keep my composure while listening. In other cases, I felt compelled to find words, even tell a story, that would comfort the participant.

Eager to tell his story. Few individuals shied away from telling their stories. None enjoyed the process as much as Shang Fuwen. Over three hours he narrated a great deal of his life, adding other stories that were outside the scope of our formal interview. I tried several times to re-orientate his answers in a direction more aligned with my own interests. He eagerly provided lots of stories from his teenage years, while I would have preferred hearing about the time he started to be involved in PI-related activities. He often more-or-less ignored my questions and kept rolling with the story I had attempted to interrupt. He brimmed with enthusiasm as he peppered his narrative with anecdotes. Fuwen's enthusiasm finally got the best of me and convinced me to give up my diversion attempts.

Not a neutral exchange. I did not always patiently listen to an interviewee, especially in the early stage of my research. I didn't realize how recurrent this issue was until I listened to the recordings. It took me several interviews to improve, but it still happened occasionally in the last interviews. Several scholars, discussing methodological questions related to interviews, point to the fact that for people engaged in the process of interviewing, this exchange is not neutral (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Fontana, 2002; Hertz, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Scheurich, 1995). For Denzin & Lincoln:

> "Two (or more) people are involved in this process, and their exchanges lead to the creation of a collaborative effort called *the interview*. The key here is the "active" nature of this process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), that leads to a

> contextually bound and mutually created story—the interview. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 696)

This description, in opposition to the positivist position, fits into the social constructivist approach. I did engage in discussions with some interviewees, and therefore make no claim of neutrality or objectivity in the positivist sense. At the same time, a die-hard positivist shadow from old times lurked above my shoulders, restraining me from further engaging in a dialog when I felt that the interview was veering too much in that direction, e.g. when I noticed that I had interrupted the train of thought of the interviewee more than once.

Just one point of time. As opinions evolve, interviews should only be considered as a reflection of what a participant thinks at the time of the interview. While I maintained contacts with most of the participants in the months, sometimes years, following the interviews, there is no guarantee that their thoughts at the time of the interviews match their current thinking. In the following example, the participant had looked back at her nine-year PI occupation with nostalgia, unsure of how long she would pursue her teaching job. Five months later, she sent me this message via WeChat:

> Recently, I've started to teach courses that I am good at. The workload is lower than before, and my mindset and my mood are much better than when I was interviewed.

I tried to mitigate this issue with follow-ups after the interviews, sending transcripts, asking for clarifications and asking new questions. In most cases, such follow-up occurred not in the days or weeks that followed the interviews, but several months later, as occurred in the above example.

By the end of my fieldwork, I had interviewed thirty-seven individuals, amounting to around eighty hours of recording. Interview materials constituted by far the most important source of data I used for this thesis.

3.3.1.3 Documentary evidence

Another source of data has been documentary evidence, i.e. edited material that entails information about PI practitioners, such as, a) feature stories publicized through WeChat accounts, b) information included in PIOs' official websites and their social media accounts, and c) articles published through media. The first

category has been used in my study of the Guangzhou Free Lunch WeChat group and to complement some of the interviews with articles published by PIPs, the second to gather data related to these organizations or projects, and the third to compare media narratives with my own findings and analysis. One of the sources I have consulted most often is a news aggregator called PI Charity Forum (*gongyi cishan luntan*). It publishes four articles almost daily through its WeChat public account or as an online forum (http://mp.aiweibang.com/m/u/528/a). China Philanthropy Times (*gongyi shibao*) is another source I have used, mainly through its WeChat public account and its website. The weekly was created in 2001 by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the China Social Work Association.

I checked the sources mentioned above on a daily basis for a period of about one year since starting stage two of fieldwork. I selected articles for their relevance to my research interest. While the objective of this research did not lie in systematically analyzing such articles via, for example, discourse analysis, such a project could yield interesting results. Part of the published materials seem to counter prevalent stereotypes such as notions of sacrifice and quasi-heroism sometimes associated with the practice of PI. Others uphold these very stereotypes, which no practitioners I have met would admit as fitting characteristics.

3.4 Data analysis

I described above how data were selected and collected. I review below the approaches I adopted to conduct the analysis: I start with interview materials, then language-related issues, e.g. how I dealt with translation of the meaning conveyed by participants. I pursue with my position in this project as a researcher, and how I reflect on this position. I explain how I used narratives, the constructed stories told by the actors, to extract cues about their motivations. I conclude this section with some principles taken from the social constructivist textbook to establish validity.

3.4.1 Interviews

By far the most abundant source of data, interviews were first transcribed using a two-step process. Instead of coding the text, I identified broad themes, summarizing them to gain an overview, then selecting passages that best illustrated the theme from the perspective of the participant.

3.4.1.1 Transcripts

I started to transcribe interviews without any help. It proved to be an arduous task. Instead of the usual five or six hours of work required for one recorded hour, I spent more than twice that amount of time on the first interviews. Some passages offered special resistance. I replayed them dozens of times before I was satisfied with my level of understanding. With the accumulation of interviews in the second stage of fieldwork, I settled on using the services of professional stenographers. While less economical in financial terms, it saved a substantial amount of time. I checked the transcripts word by word, which usually amounted to five or six hours of work per recorded hour. Being paid by the hour, most stenographers do not spell-check for incoherent words, leaving many typographical errors in the transcripts. Even so, the end result of using stenographer services and carefully checking accuracy greatly improved the efficiency of the transcript process.

3.4.1.2 Identifying themes

Instead of using a strict form of coding, I favored the identification of broad themes such as:

- Understanding of PI: what PI evoked to participants as a concept and a sector at different points of time, i.e. before entering the sector, at the time of the interview, etc.;
- Personal development: elements that participants associated with their professional skills, their ability to analyze problems, the evolution of their personality;

- History of engagement: how participants' PI engagement started and evolved over the course of time;
- Role identification: how participants viewed and defined their roles as volunteers or professionals engaged in PIOs or PI projects;
- Values: elements that participants believed to constitute core motivations for their PI engagement, including self-esteem, empathy for others or a specific group of people, the need to "behave uprightly" (*zuoren*), etc.
- Sense of accomplishment: facts, stories and emotions that participants associated with their achievements.

I categorized 17 such broad themes. Some of them entailed only a small amount of data in the end, such as "principles/rules." Others appeared recurrently throughout most interviews and provided abundant material for further consideration, such as "understanding of PI" and "values."

3.4.2 Language, translation, and transparency

Ethnographic translation is engaged in a process of dual translation: "from the oral to the written form as well as from one language to another." Reproducing the "physical, temporal and social contextuality" of an utterance "defies the translator's supposed task of reproducing meaning intact" (Sturge, 1997, p. 22). Hobart depicts an even bleaker picture in which ethnographic monographs constitute "at least [a] fifth order" of translation or textualizing (Hobart, 1996, p. 5). A major issue facing the ethnographer lies in the fact that, apart from familiarizing herself with a foreign language, culture and society, she needs to produce texts, not just translate others' (Crapanzano, 1986, p. 51).

A possible way to navigate this difficult path is transparency: "We are calling for greater transparency in the textual representation of the language of 'other' groups" (Brown & de Casanova, 2014, p. 220). This call might be answered if the researcher strived to write up and analyze her fieldwork experiences as she experienced them, "a unique challenge to the anthropologist" (Smith, 2009, p. 1). The extensive use of fieldwork notes and of actors' utterances or quotes can contribute to meeting this challenge. It does not suppress "the transduction involved in the entextualization and transcription of oral recordings of fieldwork

materials" in a context different from the original narration and the loss of important elements such as "intonation, stress, and other paralinguistic devices" (Roseman, 2014, p. 19). But these difficulties make it all the more essential "to think even more carefully about this process and specifically about how to achieve thoughtful translation," with possible options being the nontranslation of specific terms (cf. Chapter One and the introduction of the term *gongyi*) and the use of languages encountered in the field sites, "when it makes sense for non-native anthropologists" (ibid, p. 21). It is even suggested that "[t]o not treat English or other languages that are dominant in specific arenas around the world as defaults can perhaps contribute in a modest way toward a goal of increased 'polycentrism and Heteroglossia' (…) and new intellectual collaborations" (ibid, p. 22).

The results of this research were written down in English while Chinese was the fieldwork language. The only exception was an interview with a Tibetan speaker who declined to communicate in Chinese. In order to minimize the entextualization of actors' utterances and to increase transparency, I have used brackets to signal two types of situations:

- ( ) signal words that the participant did not utter but that I am very confident were implied based on the linguistic context.
- [ ] signify that the words between square brackets correspond to my interpretation. While I am fairly confident that my interpretation is accurate, I have no absolute certainty.

Every time I encountered difficulty in making sense of a sentence or a context, I asked a Chinese person--usually my wife, who studied law and worked ten years as a journalist--to listen to the section of which I could make no sense. This helped me to solve most issues, but in some cases the meaning remained unclear. In those cases I avoided using such sentences, preferring to rely on texts leaving no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding.

Specific terms. I indicate a Chinese word in its pinyin transliteration when I sense that the English translation would not allow a Chinese speaker to recognize the original term. I consistently used acronyms such as PI (public interest), PIPs (public interest practitioners) and PIOs (public interest organizations) to express

concepts that include the word *gongyi*. I avoid concepts such as NGOs or civil society, unless they were specifically used by participants or other sources I refer to. One of the most important reasons for applying PI throughout these pages lies in its overwhelming use by the practitioners I met.

3.4.3 Self

I assume that all researchers using an ethnographic approach can identify with this statement: "Indeed, the 'self' whom I brought into the field affected my fieldwork and the responses I have received from respondents" (Smith, 2009, p. 3). I certainly can. I studied, travelled and worked in China between 1991 and 1996 before moving there in 1997. I would describe myself as someone in between cultures, neither Chinese nor fully French or even Western anymore. I haven't "gone local," but neither am I a typical French, probably more one of the four types of *liumang* (hooligans) as defined by Zhu Dake: someone who does not relate to regionalism, who has long felt a certain sense of estrangement to any distinct community – Zhu refers to V. S. Naipaul – and with an identity facing many questions (Zhu, 2006, p. 58). I tend to defend Western positions when talking to Chinese friends and Chinese positions when talking to Western friends, never feeling that any of these are completely appropriate.

What about my critical distance from the society I am studying? A process that started 25 years ago, it remains ongoing and unachieved, having journeyed from early extremes of admiration and fascination during my first stay as a student in 1991, to, after a rather frustrating three-month travel in 1993, outright rejection and a promise made to myself never to tread Chinese soil again, to a less emotional but still potent relationship today: I can't imagine living and working in an environment having no connection to China. My position has evolved from a direct daily experience to that of someone more interested in observing from some distance, trying to make sense of what I observe without making speedy judgments – but repeatedly failing to do so. This research constitutes a part of that evolution and, to a certain extent, a very personal journey into a culture that has grown both more familiar and more elusive with the years.

As Ellis puts it: "Isn't ethnography also relational, about the other and the 'I' of the researcher in interaction? Might the researcher be a subject? Might the 'I' refer to the researcher who looks inward as well as outward?" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) Studying PIPs and observing their motivations seem to match the outward movement described by Ellis. But I am also engaged in an inward-looking sensemaking process.

> "There are choices to be made in the field, within relationships and in the final text. If we insert the ethnographer's self as positioned subject into the text, we are obliged to confront the moral and political responsibility of our actions." (Okely, 2005, p. 23)

But that inward-looking process does not take precedence over the study of PIPs' motivations, as I explain in the next section on reflexivity.

3.4.4 Reflexivity

> Often condemned as apolitical, reflexivity, on the contrary, can be seen as opening the way to a more radical consciousness of self in facing the political dimensions of fieldwork and constructing knowledge. (…) Reflexivity becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness." (Callaway, 2005, p. 33)

There exists a strong correlation between my avowed object of study and myself. This acknowledgement does not amount to turning myself into the object of study, as I am not interested in autoethnography. Writing about recent trends in the 1990s, Hobart wrote: "Ethnography becomes increasingly reflexive to the point that it comes close to dispensing with its object altogether. There is something seriously wrong here." My intention is not to let "the people who are the objects or subjects of the account disappear" so that they are finally "transmuted into a form quite alien to their own practices of self-description" (Hobart, 1996, p. 2).

As stated in Chapter 2, I have attempted during this whole project to avoid dichotomies, pursuing "a non-dualist argument for thinking, knowing, interpreting, understanding and indeed textualizing" (Hobart, 1996, p. 6) the social practices examined in my research. Hobart warns two pages later of the risk of overinterpretation in anthropology: "the trivial business of textualizing and placing our interpretations upon other people's practices. Instead I was concerned with analyzing how other people explained and talked about the

practices in which they were engaged in terms of their own presuppositions" (ibid, p. 8). I did not reject a dose of reflexivity, but I avoided an overdose, which would have led to what Hobart decries. Other options exist as well to explain the practices of PIPs in a way that does not betray their own views, or at least stays close.

3.4.5 Dialogue

We have seen that dialogue between researcher and subjects of research may lead to argument and even disagreement (Harold, 2001). This view is confirmed by other scholars: "Dialogue has a transformational as well as an oppositional dimension – an agonistic one. It is a relationship of considerable tension" (Crapanzano, 1992, p. 197). This tension, or dialogic translation, occurs when the source language confronts the target language. At this point, "disagreement must enter translation and there must be a certain loss of control over the turn of the conversation and over the meanings generated" (Sturge, 1997, p. 36). As Sturge reminds us, Said's famous question (Said, 1989, p. 212; cited by Sturge, 1997, pp. 36-37) applies equally to the ethnographic method and the translation process: "Who speaks? For what and to whom?" Freire agrees with this dialogic dimension that implies talking *with* the other instead of talking *to* or *for* her (Freire, 1981). Dialogue entails another dimension: not only does it enable us to be receptive to the other's narrative, individual or collective, it also offers the possibility of presenting that narrative to the other, and to receiving her comments, furthering the dialogic process and the understanding of the narrative. I mentioned that I did not eschew dialogues while interviewing participants. The dialogue was pursued after the interviews in two ways. First, transcripts were sent to participants, so they could check and comment on the content, and make some changes it if they wished. These transcripts were usually accompanied by some extra questions in which I asked them to clarify some passages and/or answer new questions. Second, I am still in contact with all the participants, regularly exchanging messages and occasionally meeting with them, which allows me to pursue exchanges and understand their evolving situations – and opinions.

3.4.6 Narratives

Disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and cultural and literary studies have long used narrative inquiry. Atkinson and Delamont (2006) even speak of a "narrative turn" in the social sciences over the last decades. But there exists no unified definition and understanding of the role and function of stories and the narrative approach. Kohler Riessman (2008) identifies the following elements most commonly accepted by various scholars:

> ... a speaker connects events into a sequence that is consequential for later action and for the meanings that the speaker wants listeners to take away from the story. Events perceived by the speaker as important are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p. 3)

Squire et al. (2008) emphasize that narrative enquiry offers several advantages: it facilitates the co-construction of social patterns; it follows larger patterns of social and cultural story-telling; social roles are performed and can thus be identified; and it allows for non-temporal sequencing. All these features contribute to avoiding longstanding dichotomies in terms of, respectively, analytical focus, audiences, agency and time. Squire (2008) adds that:

> Stories operate within "interpretive communities" of speakers and hearers that are political as well as cultural actors. They build collective identities than can lead, albeit slowly and discontinuously, to cultural shifts and political change" (Squire, 2008, p. 55)

Berger and Luckmann (1995) write of a community of life versus a community of meaning. The former is bound to a concrete point in space and time, the latter requires that it be deduced be a researcher, identifying links and patterns of common action between social actors such as individuals or organizations.

Members of a social group are constantly engaged in the construction and reconstruction of their identities through an ongoing process of social interaction. This results in the creation of a shared story about the group and what it means to be one of its members. Stories constitute one of the methods used by humans to assemble events and facts in a way that make sense within their specific lifeworlds. A story is not just an instrumental means to record and remember facts, it is also an ontological device to make sense of events, link them into a sequence and connect them by a plot (Czarniawska, 1998; Peverelli & Verduyn, 2012), which consists of dominant ideas and recurring themes.

> Sensemaking (…) consists of attempts to integrate a new event into a plot, by which it becomes understandable in relation to the context of what has happened. 'Thus, narratives exhibit an explanation instead of demonstrating it' (Polkinghorne, 1987, p. 21). (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 5)

Through narratives, researchers "often borrow pieces of other people's reasoning" (Czarniawska, 1998, p. vi). PIPs' stories and thoughts constitute the most important pieces of reasoning in this thesis. They provide the opportunity to observe how a construct is taking shape, and possibly a collective identity.

3.4.7 Validity

Adopting a social constructivist approach "does not imply that "anything goes," as Lincoln & Guba (2013, p. 47) caution. While the ontological presupposition of social constructivism is relativism, and its epistemological assumption transactional subjectivism, its methodological premise is hermeutic or dialecticism (ibid, pp. 39-40). Lincoln & Guba suggest applying the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to replace positivist criteria such as internal and external validity, and generalizability (Guba & Lincoln, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility entails prolonged engagement, assiduous observation, triangulation of sources and negative case analysis – but also other features such as triangulation of methods, theories and researchers, or peer debriefing, which I did not apply in this research. It corresponds to the criterion of internal validity of positivism.

Transferability, akin to the positivist external validity criterion of positivism, does not constitute an objective in a social constructivist approach. But thick description (Geertz, 1973), i.e. rich contextual descriptions, allows readers to determine the applicability of the findings to a specific context.

To assess dependability, which replaces positivist reliability, the inquiry process, data, findings, and interpretations need to be reviewed to ascertain the consistency of the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). I did not use an external examiner to review the inquiry process, but I tried to compensate in checking with participants whether my understanding made justice to their narratives.

Confirmability corresponds to positivist objectivity. Triangulation and reflexivity contribute to achieving confirmability. I applied triangulation in collecting and analyzing multiple types of data through interviews, participant-observation and the review of documents including articles written by PIPs, WeChat messages and media articles.

I conclude this chapter with the presentation of the main participants, individuals with whom I have had prolonged and repeated contacts in all but a few cases, and who made this research possible. Except for Deng Fei, Hu Yihua and Yu Jianrong, who can be considered public figures at various degrees and may easily be recognized through the descriptions I provide, I have changed the names of all other participants to guarantee their anonymity.

3.5 The participants

I have considered three types of actors. Professionals who have opted for this sector and worked in PIOs when we first met represent the first type. They account for the biggest group of my participants, twenty-two individuals out of a total of thirty-seven. This research mainly revolves around them and why they chose PI as a career. Volunteers who take part in PI-related activities embody the second type. Out of nine persons, only one was not involved in FL. I met them during FL-related activities in 2014 and 2015. While they do not constitute the main focus of this research, their perspectives on their PI involvement have contributed to my overall understanding of what motivates an individual to engage in PI initiatives. The third and smallest group in terms of number is one that I had not anticipated in my original research design. I decided to include four such individuals in this project after observing that the motivations between PIO workers and social enterprise (SE) workers shared a lot of commonalities. Three of them were either the founders or partners of SEs, and one worked in a SE at the time she was interviewed. She had first worked as a volunteer, then as a full-time practitioner in a PIO, before returning to that same PIO a year later.

This participant exemplified the difficulty of placing some PIPs into clear-cut categories. First, because a person's status changes with time. Second, because some individuals defy easy categorization. How does one categorize an individual who appears to be a volunteer but who spends more than 50% of his time and energy providing legal support to several PI initiatives, as is the case of Hu Yihua? How does one categorize a person whose interest in PI, first expressed through volunteering activities, turns into full-time PI practice, into a SE-related work, or into a new experience without precedent, such as working full-time for a PIO while being remunerated by one's official employer, a private enterprise? I concluded from these different situations that flexibility would be required to accommodate practical realities not always neatly fitting pre-existing categories. All these actors chose PI as their work, or as an important activity on top of their professional occupation. They are introduced below in the chronological order of the interviews, from the earliest one I conducted with Deng Fei for this project at the end of 2013, to the last one, at the end of 2016. (P) designates a professional PIP, (V) stands for volunteer and SE for someone working in a social enterprise.

Deng Fei (P) continues to present himself as an investigative journalist more than five years after having become a full-time PIP. He made a name for himself in the 2000s as a daring investigative journalist writing for Phoenix Weekly. Turning to PI in 2011, he first launched Fight against Child Trafficking, then quickly launched Free Lunch, the most famous linked to his name and the most successful by standards such as amount of donations, size of staff and public visibility. A charismatic leader, he has now launched over fifteen actions, most of them related to rural issues. One of them is to build a PI Town in Hangzhou, the first of its kind in China, to help the overall growth of the sector through, among others, systematic trainings.

Hu Yihua (V) is a lawyer who specializes in civil law and criminal law litigation cases. He took several high-profile cases on a volunteer basis, which helped raise his profile as a criminal defense lawyer. Arguably, the most famous was the "My

dad is Li Gang" case. Hu started to be involved in PI initiatives in 2011 as legal counsel, his engagement in terms of time and energy quickly surpassing his billable cases. This trend continued in the following years, with an extension of his activities to Africa, where he has become responsible for the development of Free Lunch. Together with Take a Photo to Save Begging Children, this was one of the first PI initiatives in which he became involved.

Li Hua (SE) worked as an accountant for more than ten years in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) early in her career. The company, which needed to cut its cost and its payroll, asked its employees if some would leave in exchange for compensation. She accepted the offer. Her colleagues urged her to re-consider, considering she was about to give up a "good" job, dealing with futures and guaranteeing a steady income. She preferred to leave.

Yu Jianrong (V) is a well-known scholar-activist concentrating on rural issues. He is the director of the Social Issues Research Center of the Rural Development Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). He studied law and became a commercial litigation lawyer in the early 1990s before returning to university. He earned his Ph.D. and became a vocal speaker on rural issues, campaigning in 2005 for the reform or cancellation of the petition (*xinfang*) system. He launched Take a Photo to Save Begging Children in January 2011 through the social media *Weibo*, an action that raised public attention regarding street children and trafficked children. While considering himself an intellectual, not a PIP, he subsequently launched other actions providing support to rural people experiencing difficulties. He often lectures local officials on rural issues.

You Yunchuan (V/P) was involved in Free Lunch (FL) for six years after the initiative was launched in 2011. A graphic designer by training and education, he spent a substantial amount of his time and energy supporting FL during its first few years, regularly contributing his professional skills and coordinating FL-related events in his region. He pro-actively took initiatives that pertained to the whole action at the national level, obtaining recognition from FL's co-founders. I

first met Yunchuan in 2014 during the third anniversary celebration of FL. We quickly became friends, discussing his PI activities, but also human nature, by far his favorite topic. He became a full-time professional PIP in 2017, something he had contemplated for some time.

Cao Jin (P) had already been working seven years for an environmental PIO by 2018. Two short experiences in governmental agencies had left him disappointed, so he applied as an information officer and was hired by this PIO in an inland province. Part of the three-person core team of that PIO for several years, he was promoted to the position of director after the other two persons left. He found himself in charge of a much larger team than when he had joined the organization. He described his state of mind as swinging between optimism and pessimism for the development of the PI sector and his organization, depending on the overall environment and the difficulties encountered.

Wu Hongwei (V) occupies an important position in a media institution of a central province. He developed an early interest for environmental protection, thus often being contacted by PIPs working in environmental organizations. He was an early supporter of FL and took part in the early stages. He does not claim to be a PIP himself, but as an influential media worker with good connections, he is often ready to provide media resources, including his own organization, to increase the visibility of local PIOs' public communications.

Liu Shu (P) experienced life in the countryside as a child, but that influence paled in comparison to the role played by a family member in her decision to join FL. Unsatisfied with her previous job, she returned to the original objective of helping the newly-launched initiative. It took her some time before feeling deeply involved in the project. On the verge of quitting at one point, she stayed in the organization, reflecting on her role and changing her attitude. From a person who had only implemented tasks, she became interested in thinking about new ways of mobilizing resources to extend the scheme and involve more social actors.

***Note*:**

The next seven participants were all key members of the Guangzhou FL team at the time of the interviews. You Yunchuan and Cheng Feifei were the other two core members. They are not included in this group because, a) I have had much more extensive exchanges with them since early contacts, and b) their status has changed. You Yunchuan became a professional PIP, and Cheng Feifei started an experiment that defies categorization, working full-time for the Union while remunerated by a private enterprise. I asked these seven participants few questions about childhood and education , concentrating more on their volunteering activities within the Guangzhou FL group, including their use of WeChat as a coordination and social relation maintenance tool.

Wen Zhen (V) first worked in the legal department of a large company before passing the entrance examination to become a civil servant. He started to financially support a child in Yunnan in 2009, which marked the start of his interest in education-related issues in China. He did not hesitate to become involved in FL immediately after its launch. Together with You Yunchuan and a few other individuals, he organized activities for the action in the Guangdong province and co-created the Guangzhou FL team. He was one of the key members of this group, both online and offline. His objective was to help the volunteer group become sustainable in terms of management and organization so as not to depend on a few devoted individuals.

Fan Lina (V) was a key member of the Guangzhou FL team, where she felt a sense of community that held an important place in her life. It was not just an occupation that occupied some of her time, it constituted her main interest, both online and offline, where most of her communications and activities, such as attending football matches, outings or dinners, were conducted with other FL volunteers. She was still studying Human Resources when I interviewed her, which might explain why she so often associated the word resource (*ziyuan*) with her volunteering activities. She intended to pursue her involvement upon

graduation, but more than a year admitted that she had been too busy at work to remain as involved in FL as she had been.

Feng Shaodi (V) was the person in charge of the Guangzhou FL team's WeChat group at the time of her interview, an assignment she took very seriously. Already a volunteer in her senior high school years, she had searched for a PIO that would meet her high standards of transparency before becoming involved. After a phase of observation without being involved, she decided that the local chapter of FL matched her criteria and provided support in the area she was professionally qualified: handling of confidential data, in the case of this group, volunteers' private information. She called the volunteer group a "society" that offered her a space where she could learn from others. She was thankful for her experience, saying that what she gained from her participation more than compensated for the time and energy she invested.

Li Wen (V) was speaking as a volunteer representative during an FL event in Guangzhou when I first met her. She mentioned that one of her reasons to be involved in FL and PI activities was to influence her daughter. A year later, she had moved to another city to support an online platform that aimed at pooling actors and resources for a more efficient management of PI projects. Back in Guangzhou after that venture petered out, she was planning to create her own organization focusing on PI-related projects but based on a sustainable business model. Not unlike her previous boss, she intended to create a platform that would facilitate PI events and public participation while generating income. Like several other PIPs, she typified the increasingly blurred boundaries between different PI areas.

Han Xingyi (V), like Feng Shaodi, observed the Guangzhou FL team's activities for half a year before deciding that it was a trust-worthy organization she wanted to join. She enjoyed the group's open atmosphere, an environment she did not experience in other areas of her daily life. She praised the fact that key members could openly disagree about and discuss any issue, unlike the traditional

superficial harmony often maintained in a corporate environment with backstabbing proceeding behind the scenes. She brought her HR expertise to a team focused on promoting the initiative to the general public and obtaining donations to support the action nationally.

Wang Zhao (V) was a constant presence in the group's activities, both online and offline. He was in charge of visiting schools served by the scheme in the province, but also attended numerous other events, leading FL groups during local football club matches and promoting the project. His freelance activity allowed him a degree of commitment that would hardly be possible for other individuals with fixed working hours. He felt pride in the Guangzhou team, which he compared to a family. His role, and that of the other key members, was to maintain or hold it together. They held a weekly online meeting to review current issues and discuss potential solutions. Like You Yunchuan, he used the expression "doing happy PI."

Bian Hongwu (V) often alluded to a sense of community when talking about the Guangzhou FL team during the interview, especially the key members and other volunteers who participated most regularly in FL activities. He enjoyed the "pure" motivations of the group, which, in his opinion, reflected the original purpose of the action. On a practical level, he appreciated that he could hone his management skills while leading a team or organizing an event, useful skills also needed in his professional environment as a Customs official. He described his participation as having evolved from an enthusiastic supporter to a cold observer able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative.

Cheng Feifei's (V) first PI engagement occurred during her first two years of senior high school, when she did some free homework tutoring once a week for children in an orphanage. She became involved in FL a year after she first heard about the initiative, when she had successfully passed the *gaokao*[13]. She worked

[13] The university entry exam passed at the end of the senior high school's three-year cycle. It is often considered to make or break the future of an individual. Pressure is very high on students

intensely as a FL volunteer during her four university years before taking a job in the private sector that, in her eyes, entailed a strong PI element. Less than two years later, she started a one-year experiment with her new employer: an enterprise that would pay for her salary while she worked full-time at FL's HQ. The enterprise had a double objective: explore how an enterprise and a PIO could deepen their cooperation and bring a more corporate mindset to the way the Union is run.

Chen Rongrong (P) grew up in an "average family" in an eastern province. She studied journalism and started to work in that field upon graduating from university. She had the opportunity to organize a PI forum for her magazine, her first contact with a topic related to PI. She met practitioners at the forum, which later led to a job opportunity. Often on the road for her PI job, she experienced a crisis in her personal relationship that led her to question the form of her involvement. She finally left the first PI job for one in the private foundation of a major online retailer in China. After more than a year in the new position, she was highly satisfied with her work, which allowed her to stay in the PI sector while enjoying good material conditions.

Bei Peng (P) worked as an accountant for a PI institution for three years. It was a stopgap rather than his primary choice, because he urgently needed a job. He described his three-year experience as having started without any understanding of or knowledge about PI. His experience then evolved in appreciation, sometimes even admiration, for some of the practitioners he met during his work. It ended in negativity and frustration, with ill feelings toward his organization and, particularly, his hierarchical superior. I met him while he was still working for that PIO. Having heard he had left in discontent, I wanted to understand the reasons for his dissatisfaction. He did not participate in any PI-related activities

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during these three years to study hard in order to enter well-ranked universities, as graduating from a better university is considered to open more job opportunities and better career prospects. Parents often dissuade their children to spend time doing anything but studying during these three years, especially in the last one.

in the next two years, but he did not dismiss the possibility of being involved again at some point in the future.

Niu Lili (P) had already been an active PIP for seven years when I met her at the Union, first as a volunteer, then as a professional. She belonged to a small category of individuals I encountered who felt at an early point in their lives that they wanted to “do PI.” She worked as a team member for a project that provided medical insurance support to gravely ill children in rural areas. But she could not see a clear plan for the years ahead. She wanted to work in a better-managed organization and left for a foundation where she was still working two years later, having become a team manager. She was still animated with the same ideal of improving the lives of a few people, an ideal that she had expressed during the interview.

Zhang Ke (P) had been working at the Alliance for a year when we first met. Before he decided to become a full-time PIP, he had been active as a volunteer for nine years, starting in his first year of senior high school at a local volunteer association. He became the head of the organization in his early twenties, participating in various community development activities while raising awareness about some local issues and attempting to draw more volunteers to participate. He left the Alliance a few months later. Having decided to remain in the PI sector, he set up a new environmental organization in his hometown, for which he sought financial support from various foundations.

Zhu Xia (P) was the head of a project launched in 2012 at the Union. It aimed to support families of children who were gravely ill through a medical insurance subsidy. Medical costs could amount to hundreds of thousands of RMB. She had experienced the early hours of the project, when it was managed by another person who set the long-term strategy. Zhu Xia became the new head when this person left, quickly leading a few co-workers. She often travelled to the few counties which had established a cooperation with the project, meeting the beneficiaries and checking their conditions, talking to the different family

members, discussing how to improve their work with partnering insurance companies and local officials. Having studied journalism at university, she hadn't planned a career in the PI sector. She interrupted her PI career a year later to study abroad. Half-way through her two-year program, she was not sure yet about her future plans.

Lan Yaoli (P) attended classes for one year at the age of eighteen to become a teacher in rural schools in a poor region. Disappointed, she quit after three months in her first assignment, doing various short-term jobs before hearing through Weibo that the FL initiative was looking for volunteers. She started to help out of curiosity, and became involved full-time for more than half a year. When she received an offer to become a paid employee, she could not reconcile her understanding of PI with the fact that one could be a salaried professional. It took several months for her to accept a salary and more than a year to finally accept that this wasn't going to be temporary. When I interviewed her in 2016 she could not imagine leaving the PI sector. She was still pursuing the same occupation two years later.

Ma Zhuoya (SE/P) grew up in a village where clan relations were troubled and complex, leaving her with many traumas from her youth. She studied accounting at university, but never enjoyed that field. Hearing about a project that aimed at preventing child trafficking, she checked information about the initiative online and applied to become a volunteer. She was first asked to coordinate information between different parties before being allowed to speak directly with parents of abducted children, a task that requires particular emotional stability. At the time of my stay at the Union, she was working for another initiative, a social enterprise selling rural products grown in poor counties and sold directly to urbanites. But she didn't feel attracted to this work. A few months later, she asked to be assigned to her previous project. While she did not consider leaving the PI sector, she saw her low salary as a long-term challenge.

Shang Fuwen (P) started to be engaged in PI as a volunteer in his first university year. He became a full-time practitioner upon graduating. Born in a village in a northwestern province, he and his two sisters fell gravely ill when there were children, resulting in the family having to borrow in order to cover medical costs. He made it to university, studying tourism management. At the same time, he taught migrant children in a local PIO. He opted for a PI career after graduation, starting to work at the Union after an experience in a PIO in the Northeast. He liked keeping himself busy and being involved in several projects, which allowed him a good overview of the overall situation of the Union. Among all the PIPs I met and interviewed at the Union in 2016, he was the only one still working there in mid-2018.

Huang Linglong (P), in her mid-forties, was one of the few PIPs I met who had received no formal education. A single mother living in a western province, we had WeChat exchanges for more than a year before I met her face-to-face for the first time to interview her. Like Ma Zhuoya, she worked for a project fighting against child trafficking. She was responsible for the whole project at the national level, spending her days behind her computer and her phone, coordinating with different parties, and often listening to parents who needed to vent their grievances. Some had become friends who called to ask her advice. She intended to pursue her PI involvement.

Pei Yanni (P) knew that her son was different, but no doctors could identify his problem in her city. After identifying his problem as autism and setting on various methods to help him improve his condition, she became a volunteer in a specialized PIO. Not satisfied with the method applied by this PIO, she established her own organization in her home city. She first provided care to autistic and mentally handicapped children, then gradually extended her organization’s services to adults. Every year she sends staff members to be trained in Beijing. While she was optimistic about the development of her organization, she remained worried about who would become care providers for her son and other autistic and mentally handicapped persons after her death.

Jorge (P), an ethnic Tibetan, spent ten years of his life in Nepal from the age of 16. He came back to his native region in China in the 1990s following the efforts of the local government, who wanted to attract Tibetans living in Nepal to contribute to developing the region. After a difficult start, Jorge's work and the foundation he created were supported by the local government and experienced some success. But the level of support decreased with time as the local economy became stronger and the government richer. Now in his mid-fifties, Jorge refused the label of PI, identifying himself instead as working for the development of his region, especially in the field of community development.

Lan Tian (P) was born in the 1980s in South China. She spent her childhood with her four brothers and sisters in a village close to an urban area. The death of her mother when she was eight made the precarious family situation even worse. She went to a technical school (*zhongzhuan*) at the age of 15. Four years later, her first professional experiences were related to her studies in chemistry. She later became a salesperson. She joined a PIO at 26 as the first full-time PIP ever hired by this organization. She was still working there eight years later among dozens of full-time staff and volunteers. Dealing with simple organizational matters at the beginning, she went on to plan and manage a national project aimed at improving the well-being of children in rural areas.

Guo Zuquan (P) grew up in a rural area at the fringe of an urbanized zone. She was in a transitory situation when we met. She had worked nine years in a PIO supporting mentally handicapped people before starting to teach social work in an educational institution. She had dreamed of being a teacher for years. After a year in her new job, she nostalgically looked back at her time in the PIO and had doubts about the long-term prospects of her new career. Five months after the interview, she wrote that she had finally settled in at her teaching job and that she had started to enjoy it. Teaching social work constituted an extension of her PI work and she felt very attached to her students.

Yue Fei (P), who studied English at university, did not plan a PI career. His first job was not related to the sector, but a family member mentioned a new job opportunity in 2010, which led to his PI engagement. Yue Fei mentioned a certain tradition in his family of serving the public good. He worked in a foundation which helped children from poor families obtain medical treatments for seemingly hopeless conditions in small towns' local hospitals, treatments that were almost routine procedures in the best national hospitals. He described his work with enthusiasm and passion, convinced it transformed the lives of recipient children. Pursuing a PI career was his first choice, but he admitted that practical and material issues related to his life in Beijing, and the professional uncertainties faced by his wife, could still change his plans.

Jin Min (P), in a fashion similar to several of the other individuals I interviewed, had her first experience with associational activities during her university years, where she created an environmental organization. While she described herself as not being hard-working, happy to be an average person, someone with no special abilities or special ambitions, she also noted that she had loved taking responsibilities and managing other individuals since her childhood school days. At the time of the interview, she had worked for several years in a foundation promoting the growth of the overall PI sector. She insisted that, contrary to some existing stereotypes, nothing she had ever done in the field of PI could be associated with sacrifice or similar notions. To her, working in the PI sector "is just a job like any other."

Hu Bing's (P) first passion had been photography, of which he spoke very fondly. He felt no clear inclination for a particular major before entering university, and he quickly lost interest in international politics, then anthropology, finding the courses too theoretical. He applied to several PIOs and was hired by an organization that aimed to improve teaching methods and conditions in poor regions of West China. This matched his wish to do practical, on-the-ground work. But he had serious doubts about the value of his work and the concrete changes it brought to its recipients. He was not convinced that

teachers integrated suggested changes into their teaching methods, or that it increased rural children's chances of a better education. He was uncertain about his PI future at the time of the interview, but he still worked in the same PIO 18 months later.

Liu Huimin (SE) studied advertising at university. Together with her team, she obtained the best mark in the whole faculty for her graduation case study focusing on promoting a PI project launched by a private foundation. This led to an internship in that foundation, and then her first professional job. Her role was to show innovative thinking to promote some of the foundation's projects and raise their profiles, leading to increased donations. She decided that a more business-oriented strategy should be applied to PI issues, and she co-founded a social enterprise (SE), describing herself as the down-to-earth party with a business mindset. While acting as a job hunter for PIOs searching for talent, her SE also designed CSR projects for large companies. Her company has received investment and her staff has been steadily growing.

Zhang Li (P) told me that he inherited his father's habit of caring for others. While studying at university he was deeply shocked by a TV program about hemophilia. He contacted the family of the child featured in the program, then started to raise awareness on campus about hemophilia. A few years later, this lead him to accept a job offer at a PIO providing support to hemophiliac persons. On the verge of quitting at one point, he persisted and became the most active member, working directly with affected families and their children. He believed his work brought positive changes to those the organization supported, even if it had come at the price of accepting a very modest material situation. But he had no doubt about the value of his work.

Lin Meijiao (P) learned to make her own decisions and become independent when she was a teenager, a development that was probably accelerated by the difficulties endured by her family. Her associative life started in her university years, as is often the case for university students. She later engaged in voluntary

work when working for an international advertising, marketing and public relations company. Thanks to this experience, she was hired by a private foundation established by a Hong Kong businessperson. She had been contemplating entering the PI sector for several years, but without any prior frontline experience in the PI sector ten years after graduating, she had to settle for an administrative work. After several years she sought a more highly remunerated position, leaving for a newly-created PI institution where she was also responsible for organizational tasks.

Ye Bo (P), who is hemophiliac, could not attend school in his childhood due to his condition. He found himself isolated from children his age, a situation that lasted well into his twenties. Without a diploma and a formal education, and as a handicapped person only able to move in a wheelchair, his professional prospects were bleak until he met some of his peers at a meeting organized for hemophiliac people. He quickly became involved in activities to better the conditions of hemophilia sufferers. He established his own PIO, which he registered several years after it had started operating. He tried different ways to advance the agenda of his peers and to advocate the creation of new regulations. His organization is now a partner-of-choice of government departments, which regularly consult him on issues related to hemophiles.

Li Wan (SE) was a university student when an earthquake struck Ya'an in April 2013. With the authorization of his school, he joined the ranks of thousands of volunteers who poured into the afflicted area to provide support. This experience inspired him to start working in the PI field. He worked for a few PIOs helping with post-earthquake relief efforts, before joining a small private company whose objective was to plan CSR projects for large enterprises, matching them in the process with PIOs that have the ability to carry out the planned projects on the ground. Li Wan is one of the four participants in this research who switched work from a non-profit PIO to a social enterprise, adopting a commercial approach while implementing PI objectives.

Chapter 4 Who are PIPs: Narratives of Identity

As I described in Chapter 1, my original interest lay in SNS-facilitated actions launched in 2011. Looking back at the first interviews and observations made when I was still considering that preliminary approach, it appeared that they had already entailed indications and cues regarding PIPs' motivations. Before starting prolonged fieldwork for this project in 2016, I met Deng Fei a number of times between 2012 and 2015. The first two meetings were formal interviews. Later encounters were made during events or activities I attended as an observer, sometimes taking the opportunity to engage Deng Fei in conversation.

4.1 An investigative journalist turned PIP

The first interview took place in *Phoenix Weekly* headquarters in Beijing in September 2012. I waited half-an-hour before Deng Fei came out of a meeting room packed with dozens of staff. I was sitting close to the door, which allowed me a furtive peep into the room each time someone entered or left. He appeared to be the person in charge, allocating tasks and leading the debate. A couple of minutes after the interview started in a small garden outside his office building, Deng Fei excused himself, telling me he had an important meeting about another initiative he had just freshly launched. He left me with two young men sitting at the same table, presenting one of them as very knowledgeable about Free Lunch (FL), the 500-journalist alliance. The man had co-started the initiative a year and-a-half earlier.

4.1.1 Looking for social movements

Struggling against a sudden feeling of letdown because of what looked like a failed attempt at interviewing Deng Fei, I forced myself to start a conversation and asked the men a few questions. This grew into a half -hour exchange before Deng Fei finally came back. While I re-read the transcript of Deng Fei's answers several times in the following years, it took me five years before I read again the

exchange I had this day with these two volunteers. Only then did I notice then that their statements corresponded in many ways to the interviews I did in the following years for my Ph.D. project.

My first question revolved around the nature of FL and whether it constituted a social movement. I had not learned yet that asking questions about definitions and sociological concepts was not the best way to start an interview or an informal exchange.

> First volunteer:
> Because we're doing PI, I don't think we should say that it is a kind of social movement or event or whatever. It just starts from ourselves. China's population is huge, I think it's known all over the world, so we think that the government may not be able to provide care (to so many people) for some time. We hope, through our tiny efforts, to do a little something. Hopefully we can do something to help children in impoverished mountainous areas, to help their health or in other ways. (20120919_DF, p. 2)

The emphasis lay on action, not on terminological precision or conceptual subtleties. What struck me when I re-read their answers were the feelings or learnings they associated with their participation in FL.

> First volunteer:
> (…) … as a reporter, we might have this feeling... When we go to places across the country, we see a lot of things like these [i.e., children having nothing to eat at lunchtime at school]. It's because I saw these things that I wanted to do those things. Now that I've done it, I feel very happy, because these things I've done really help these children. If there is really any evolution, I can only say that I'm very happy, I feel like I'm doing what I want to do, and I'm helping people I want to help, which makes some little changes in their lives. They feel like they've finally eaten, they don't need to drink cold water every day (to cheat their hunger) or not to eat. They need to walk a long, long road, and to spend a long, long time to go back home. Then they spend a long, long time from home to return to school for classes. But now, these children don't need to go back home [for lunch, or to stay hungry at school]. They can eat hot meals. Seeing them make me feel very happy, very joyful. Even before I see them, I also feel very happy and joyful, because I got something in return for what I did. That's how it is in fact. (20120919_DF, p. 5)

> Second volunteer:
> In fact, from my personal point of view, first of all, I think it has taught me how to cherish, cherish what I have now, i.e., good health, a very common meal, exactly the kind of things that these children lack. After seeing them and comparing with my life, this makes me understand that I must cherish what I have now. Another thing is hard work, I can't satisfy myself with the current situation, I have to work hard to let myself or my family live a little better. Then, at the same time, I'll also have a stronger ability or greater ability to help more children or some other people who need help. (20120919_DF, p. 5)

They concentrated on how their participation in FL had benefitted them, the emotions it had generated, and the conclusion they had derived from their involvement. They also used the word "responsibility" to explain their motivations. One of them drew his explanations from China's traditional culture to clarify what he had in mind with this concept.

> There is also a question of responsibility. There is an old saying in our country that says: "every ordinary person is responsible for the rise and fall of the country." This is a sense of responsibility. Then there is a song called "If everyone contributes a share of love, this world will become beautiful." This, in China, is a kind of... As a Chinese, this is the reflection of a sense of responsibility in our society. (20120919_DF, p. 5)

It became a rule for me to avoid judging the factual, historical, or cultural accuracy of PIPs' statements, unless detrimental to the understanding of their narratives or creating more confusion than comprehension. The first reason is that accuracy is generally less important than what the statement says about a person's perceptions and cognition of a certain issue, as suggested by the social constructivist approach. Second, accuracy is relative and can be argued about, such as in the case of responsibility and its importance in Chinese culture. Interesting as such arguments might be, they would not address the main problematic of this thesis regarding what constitutes PIPs' motivations and how sensemaking can be used to understand these motivations. What I found most interesting, years after this exchange, was the fact that these two volunteers did not only describe the emotional consequences of, and conclusions drawn from, their PI involvement. They also explained their individual behavior, which they qualified as being "responsible," by associating it with a quality inherent to their profession and to the culture they belonged to, providing a justification at the group and social levels. I had decided to apply sensemaking as a theoretical framework by the time I finally re-read this exchange, which I felt could be applied to these two volunteers to understand how they explained their PI involvement. They clearly identified themselves as journalists, even if one of them was unemployed and unsure he would remain in this area. They attributed at least one specific characteristic to members of this profession, i.e. responsibility, thus ascribing a social role and function to journalists as a social group. One of these two volunteers added that it had even influenced his views on work and family. In short, it seemed that one's organizational belonging

shaped one's sense of identity and how one viewed life as a whole. This was not fully convincing, but it hinted at the potential of sensemaking for further understanding of PIPs' motivations.

4.1.2 Cooperation instead of opposition

When he came back after half-an-hour, I asked Deng Fei the same question I had addressed to the two volunteers regarding his actions. His first reaction was to categorically refuse any association with the term *cishan*, charity or philanthropy, insisting that "I am not a philanthropist, without any doubt I am definitely not." But he accepted the appellation of "social movement" for his actions, although he later considered that calling his initiatives social movements or PI actions amounted to theoretical hairsplitting: it did not make any difference in terms of what they could achieve.

> ... I don't understand (why) you in academia make so many detours. I think there is not much difference between social movements and PI movements. What is the difference? But you create some of these concepts and impose them on people. But for us, we are all (doing this) for the public interest, it's all about extensive mobilization and accumulation of strength to implement changes. There is no essential difference. (20120919_DF, p. 17)

What did he want to achieve through his initiatives? He wanted to prompt the government to act in areas that had been left unattended in the past.

> Because I'm originally a journalist, what I've seen is the inaction of the government. Although we're now working hard, we want to prompt the government and urge it to act. Because that is originally what it does. Why not unite with the government then? (20120919_DF, p. 13)

He could not see the possibility of working without the government, even less against it, and thus rejected the notion of staying away from governmental institutions, a position defended by the scholar-activist Yu Jianrong in media interviews and reiterated when I interviewed him in June 2014. Yu declared that he could never turn into a "so-called" PI person. "Deng Fei stopped criticizing the government after he engaged in PI. I cannot do this nonsense (*goupi*) PI and not criticize the government. I think this is not where the responsibility of an intellectual lies" (20140614_YJR). Deng Fei defended the opposite view. In his opinion, cooperation with government officials entailed more advantages than disadvantages.

> I think Yu is extremely wrong. In any social movement or any PI initiative, we need to unite the strength of more people and to make concerted efforts to solve problems through cooperation. The three initiatives we have launched all encourage internal cooperation within the people (*minjian*). Then we must cooperate with the government, because the government controls most resources and power. Why should we isolate ourselves and indulge in self-admiration? What we want is change. Of course, we will also be attacked for the reason that our popular initiatives are too close to the government. Does it hurt to get too close? (20120919_DF, pp. 12-13)

He summarized his objectives in three words: cooperation, construction and progress. He had launched three initiatives at the time: Fight Child Trafficking, Free Lunch and China Rural Kids Care. In order to be operated, the three actions needed not only the approval, but the active support of local governments. Full-fledged cooperation with local government might also lead to these projects gaining visibility at the highest governmental levels of the country.

> (…) cooperation with people, with society, with the government. Second, what do we cooperate for? Construction, not to complain and criticize (…). Of course, there should also be such emotions, but mainly we want to move and to act. Third, progress, to achieve a win-win situation: the government wins, the people win, society wins, we win, even civil servants win, everyone is a win-win situation. What is bad about that? (20120919_DF, p. 13)

> (…) many civil servants are involved, including for China Rural Kids Care and FL. We are now cooperating with three counties. In two counties (the projects) have been fully rolled out, they are cooperating with us. That way, the Central Government can see it. (20120919_DF, p. 15)

It did not mean that his initiatives would never bring governmental officials in awkward situations. But creating these situations only constituted a means to an aim. Talking about FL, he explained what kind of feelings he wanted to elicit among the public and ultimately among government officials.

> Everything we do reflects what the government hasn't done perfectly in this respect. But we also tell everyone that no government can be perfect. We definitely give the government a hard time in that regard. This actually means that we have started to act, we have crossed boundaries [between different sectors of society]. Some officials feel very uncomfortable and embarrassed, because indeed it's only because they haven't done well that we step in. But what we primarily do is to drive the positive energy of the whole society. Because if we bring everybody to act, to implement, to build, it (i.e., Free Lunch) does not bring people anger, not hatred, but love and kindness. Then, positive energy can be infectious, we can easily affect government officials within the system. Of course, it's very easy, because at home, we are all fathers and mothers. (20120919_DF, p. 13)

As I would learn during the second stage of my fieldwork, not all local authorities accepted to cooperate with FL's team. The embarrassment associated with the need to receive assistance in order to feed local children dissuaded some

officials to consider a cooperation with FL. But Deng Fei's narrative remained a positive one, associating notions such as love, kindness, and positive energy with FL. He thought that these positive emotions would overcome hesitations among government officials.

> Yes, we first start from children, which is the easiest (area) everyone can reach a consensus about. What do we generate this way? A confluence. Yu (Jianrong) has no choice. The people he has chosen (to support) are against the government (*fanmin*), only individuals who have sharp conflicts with local governments petition, maybe these contradictions cannot be reconciled. But when we help children, we can reconcile (all people), even murderers have donated money to us. (20120919_DF, p. 13)

During this first encounter, Deng Fei raised a few important points that escaped my attention at the time, probably because I then focused on SNS-facilitated initiatives. He made it clear that he had decided to be active in areas supported by the government, areas that could easily create a consensus among the public and other social actors. He did not engage in the defense of petitioning individuals, in legal rights protection (*weiquan*) or in LGBTQ activism. As my research advanced, this element proved increasingly important. Most of the individuals I met worked in arguably "safe" areas. They dealt with social issues that entailed little or no contentious factors likely to generate governmental suspicion or opposition[14]. This did not fit with the traditional opposition of social and governmental organizations, an opposition that is taken for granted in the civil society framework. He also refused the term charity *cishan*, charity or philanthropy, insisting on *gongyi* (public interest) instead, which would become an increasingly important distinction the more I progressed in this research. This led me to review my theoretical approach regarding the contentious element I originally associated with PI actions.

4.1.3 Change instead of complaint

In retrospect, that first encounter also called my attention to the fact that understanding individual motivations should be the first and essential step in

[14] The notion of which topic is sensitive or not is arguably volatile. Community building backed by the local government in one region might be unwelcome in an ethnically sensitive area. Environmental protection supported in one county might face tough challenges in another where the local government heavily depends on a few polluters for its tax revenues.

analyzing PI as a new form of social activism or a new form of social engagement. The statements of the two volunteers already pointed in that direction, as did Deng Fei's answers. It was easy to feel his excitement at having started his transition into a soon-to-be full-time PIP. His eyes gleamed when he told the story of Free Lunch (FL) while I wanted to focus on Fight Child Trafficking instead, the topic of my master's thesis at the time. He told me how, in his opinion, FL had been a major factor in influencing the Ministry of Education to allocate a yearly amount of RMB 16 billion to provide lunches to children in rural schools in 2011, which was precisely FL's objective. He was beaming with enthusiasm and energy, contagious emotions felt by the two volunteers sitting with us that day, but also by several of the individuals working in his organization I would later interview for my Ph.D. research.

The second interview took place in his office in Beijing at the end of 2013, when he had further strengthened his status as a VIP in the PI sector. We sat in a space allocated by a corporate sponsor where he was now working as a full-time PIP. About thirty people were working on the several initiatives he had already launched at that time. Concentrating on the discussion proved difficult as we were constantly interrupted by his co-workers or other visitors. I did not find the exchange to be as interesting as the first time. I attributed the reason to the crammed space and the continuous flow of colleagues and visitors preventing us from having a sustained dialog. But this was probably not the only reason. When I attended two events related to FL in Guangzhou during my first year as a Ph.D. candidate, I was struck by how much he had changed. I felt that he had become a manager busy promoting his most recent projects, organizing his teams and sharing skills and know-how gained across his different initiatives. This was confirmed during the second stage of fieldwork in early 2016 (see Chapter 3). He spent a substantial amount of his time acting as a broker between different social actors, a communication node who gathered and shared information from and with internal and external actors of his organization. As such, he played the role of a boundary spanner, a role that has been deemed "crucial to the effective development or diffusion of innovation" across an organization (Tushman, 1977). His "resources," to use the Chinese term (*ziyuan*), or social capital,

allowed him to enroll multiple actors such as entrepreneurs, celebrities, media personalities and executives, local officials, and social groups targeted by his actions.

4.1.4 Identity narrative

Regularly attending public events where he presented some of his actions led him to develop presentation routines that became so rehearsed that it could sometimes be difficult to distinguish the routine from his personal thoughts. I felt it had become increasingly difficult to gain access to these thoughts.

He systematically highlighted a few points when interacting with an audience, either during his presentations or in less public situations.

4.1.4.1 Identities

The first point was identity-related. He was, first and foremost, an investigative journalist who had spent ten years publishing stories about unpalatable cases and dirty dealings in China. This represented his former self. But he had become a PI personality, someone respected for the actions he had launched, another identity he had dynamically constructed in just a few years. Both identities were characterized by opposing motivations.

4.1.4.2 Motivations

By his own account, his work—the stories he published for a decade—did not make any substantial difference. Some of the culprits behind his stories were finally held accountable and some of the people who had suffered benefited from the publicization of their cases. But no systemic or institutional changes ever occurred following his stories. In his own words, his transition was about stopping to complain (*bu yao baoyuan*), but instead looking for solutions to concrete problems and looking to change some situations (*yao gaibian*). In short, he had moved away from a contentious approach and favored a constructive one.

4.1.4.3 Always a communicator

Deng Fei had completed his transition from a journalist to a full-time PIP by the time of the second interview. But one element had remained recurrent: pointed communication. Acutely aware of the benefits of communicating, he constantly delivered similar messages in his numerous public speeches addressed to different audiences, e.g. to university students who often invited him as a VIP of the PI sector and who were potential recruits to join the ranks of his actions; or during internal exchanges in his organization with his co-workers. He posted updates that often showed him meeting social actors supporting his initiatives. These updates, published on his *weibo* account during the first two to three years, then on his WeChat public account, were aimed at both internal and external audiences to further emulate support. He still occasionally wrote articles published in the media about his PI initiatives.

It took a long time for these first meetings with Deng Fei to be reflected in my research direction. A similar outcome occurred with the next two persons I interviewed. They would ultimately lead me to review common assumptions about the term PI being understood as another term for charity or philanthropy. They would also illustrate that categories usually strictly separated, such as volunteer and professional worker in a social organization, were not always so distinct from each other. The second interview occurred in January 2014.

4.2 A "Full-time" volunteer

Hu Yihua, in his early thirties when we first met in January 2014, was born in Hunan Province. At 17 he left home and went to Beijing where he studied for a year before taking and passing the national judicial examination at 18. He became an intern and learned the profession of lawyer. He considered going to the United States to study and prepared a full year for that objective, including taking English lessons. He finally abandoned this plan, considering that it would be more valuable to remain in China and work as a lawyer. After a few years of practice, he became an expert in civil law and criminal law litigation cases.

4.2.1 Looking for fulfilment

Yihua could justly claim on his personal *weibo* account to be a "well-known criminal defense lawyer" with some prominent cases under his belt: the affair of the CCTV building fire that engulfed the Television Cultural Center of the new CCTV Headquarters in February 2009; the country's first human organ trading case; the Mean post-90 Girls affair; three cases in which he worked for the defendants; and the "My dad is Li Gang" case, where he represented the family members of the victim Chen Xiaofeng, an incident which has its own Wikipedia page and was abundantly covered by international media such as *The New York Times* in 2010 and early 2011.

While he was doing well financially and had a successful career as a lawyer, he started to have some doubts about the significance of his work.

> I know that during that time I could handle 130 to 140 cases a year.
>
> (…)
>
> I had five assistants, they helped me to deal with everyday work. I worked like that for about two years until 2010. Then, slowly, I began to feel it wasn't that meaningful, first because it was so hard (*xinku*) every day, and second because I could not see so much value, it was about making money. (20140109_HYH, p. 2)

I immediately related to his statement. I never earned large amounts of money, and I was at least ten years older than Yihua when I started to feel doubts about my professional path. By any standards, one could hardly use the word "successful" to qualify my modest career. But like him, I could not see so much value in my work. Another aspect of that "lingering doubt" I could relate to lay in the absence of a discernable crisis or marking event that would have precipitated our doubts.

He mentioned only in passing that he had worked on legal cases on a volunteer basis, without asking for any remuneration. He did not seem to associate these cases with PI activities. Instead, he marked the beginning of his involvement as corresponding to his meeting with a group of journalists, Deng Fei among them, in 2010. Both natives of Hunan Province, they quickly found common interests.

> I have forgotten if it was the World Cup, it was during the previous World Cup (in 2010), we watched the final in a bar together, it seems that was the first time I met Deng Fei. I learned to know him better later, that happened because of a person called (he thinks a few seconds) XW. This person was a farmer in Hebei. His two daughters got leukemia. Deng Fei had visited him, and he then thought it would

> need a lawyer to help, so he brought him and came to see me. (20140109_HYH, p. 3)

They hadn't known each other for long when Deng Fei asked Hu's help in providing legal support in a "rights protection" (*weiquan*) case concerning a farmer in Hebei Province who was convinced his daughters had contracted leukemia due to the pollution of a neighboring factory. Deng Fei then launched Fight Child Trafficking (*weibo daguai*) in which Hu Yihua became involved as well, gauging whether the action could encounter legal problems regarding image and privacy rights, or other issues that could potentially pose a legal challenge.

4.2.2 About responsibility

In March 2011, he was assessing the legal risks incurred by FL, which was to be launched a month later. He flew to Guizhou in April to assist with the opening of the first canteen. As a lawyer used to the setting of a courtroom, he faced a situation he had never encountered before.

> There were a few issues with this first school that started to distribute lunches, such as balancing the books. There were only 20,000 yuan, if the school did not raise funds, it would immediately run out of money, lunches would stop. At that time, a few of us were invited to the stage to speak: "there is a very simple ceremony now, you should speak." In fact, I faced that kind of situation for the first time on the stage, I was super-nervous. Maybe in a courtroom the process is more procedural, serious, and urbanized. Suddenly I was facing so many children and I did not know what to say, you know. Then I could only talk about my own situation, that I was also a rural child, also very poor, through my efforts I was now doing pretty well. (I told them) "I think you must not be (overwhelmed) by current difficulties, through hard work, it will certainly be different, you will be able to change, to live better. Because now (you live in) difficulties and poverty." At that time, I could only share one thing with them, I could only tell them that through efforts they would be able to make some changes, "you certainly will not live your whole life in this poverty. As long as you have a dream and strive, you will be able to go out from these mountains." At that time, for me, I could only share (this) with them. Secondly, I felt that we came to their school to help them solve a problem, to help them prepare lunches, this was a promise. In fact, it was first about sharing, and then about a promise. Following that promise we needed to honor our commitment, so this is one of the most important reasons for persevering until today, I think. (20140109_HYH, pp. 5-6)

Yihua pinpointed this moment making a speech in front of children as a pivotal instant for his sustained engagement. This promise had to be kept, it could not be withdrawn. He also evoked his own situation as a child having experienced

poverty, something that he only mentioned in relation to his speech during that interview. It is hard to gauge how important that factor counted in his PI involvement. I can only say that several of the PIPs I met who worked on rural issues had grown up in rural areas and had experienced poverty or other difficulties.

Yihua did maintain the same level of involvement in the three years following our first encounter, holding various functions in several projects of the Union, such as Secretary-General of the Free Lunch fund management committee, member of Hope Farm's board of directors–becoming involved in the strategy of this social enterprise. His activities were not restricted to the Union's projects, e.g. he was also involved as legal counsel in Love Save Pneumoconiosis (*da ai qing chen*) after its launch in 2011 by Wang Keqin, a famous investigative journalist in the 2000s; and in a poverty alleviation initiative in the Jiangxi Province in 2017. That same year, the focus of his attention shifted from China to Africa, where FL had extended, starting in Kenya.

A figure that stunned me at the time of our first encounter was how much of his time Yihua devoted to PI activities: between 50% and 60%. He only spent between 20% and 30% on billable cases to ensure a stable financial life for his family and himself, a practice he described as common among other lawyers involved in rights protection (*weiquan*) and PI activities. He filled the rest of his tight schedule studying an EMBA program, with the objective of better understanding his clients' organizational processes, needs and business goals, and to improve his management skills. He thought the program would benefit both his legal practice and his PI involvement.

4.2.3 Simplicity, not loftiness

When I asked him during our first encounter what his personal reasons were for being so actively engaged in PI initiatives, he provided the following explanations:

> Is it for your celebrity, is it for your inner (sense of) fairness and justice, or what is it for? At that time, I also thought about this thing, you know. Later, I kept thinking, if a reason really needs to be found, I'd say it's actually very hard to

> find. Why? Because I remember everything differently. For example, how I took the Tang Hui[15] case last year.
>
> At the beginning, it was because a friend looked for me to help, a journalist friend. He said Tang Hui then needed a lawyer to help her with suggestions about the case, she has no money, go and help her. From my point of view, I thought, I was idle anyway, spending a day to help her for a court session is like lifting a finger. I said yes. It was that simple, not so lofty. (20140109_HYH, p. 11)

At this point, I expressed some skepticism about the simplicity he invoked. I could not reconcile his simple argument with the degree of his engagement. One can say yes once or twice, but that does not explain a continuous, long-term commitment. A momentary mood or emotion might work a couple of times, but I doubted it could motivate him for several years.

> Yes! (It's that simple) I don't feel, like some people say, that we have taken these legal rights protection (*weiquan*) case for a high pursuit, for fairness, justice, for human rights. I do not think I... I did this... At the beginning, I got involved in this matter… To be honest, I am a simple (*shizai*) person, I don't want to package myself as a human rights fighter, (it's just) a very realistic thing. There is someone looking for me to help with this matter. Hebei University, that matter (Li Gang is my dad), in fact, it was very simple as well. Family members said: "We don't have money, but you know about our current situation, can you help?" Then I could immediately see they were a vulnerable group, they needed that thing (help). From my perspective, if I have time today and I don't take this case, if I drink tea the whole afternoon here, it's also an afternoon, this is the truth. That's how I feel. (20140109_HYH, p. 12)
>
> … for example, Tang Hui's case, what is it (about), it is (about) responsibility, why? First, when I took this case, I didn't know there would be such a huge problem behind it, I took it, I signed a legal support contract with her. Then there was a paper contract, you've got to fulfill this contract, this is your responsibility, to do this thing, to complete it, it's your duty. It's not so lofty, it's not so noble as many people say. Some lawyers say: "I am doing something very noble," they say they are a kind of fighter. (20140109_HYH, pp. 13-14)

That still did not explain the why of his decision to help in that case, as well as in other cases. Two elements emerged from his narrative. First, he had built a second, powerful identity as a lawyer engaged in PI activities, investing more than 50% of his time and energy in the endeavor. Second, he refused any association with terms such as "lofty" or "fighter," preferring instead a simple "responsibility" factor that did not make complete sense to me. I suspected his main motivation lay in identity building and the related pride and/or sense of

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[15] Tang Hui is the name of a woman whose daughter, 11-year-old at the time, was raped and then forced into prostitution for more than two months. Faced with the Police's refusal to file the case, her mother then petitioned several times. The culprits were finally arrested and condemned, but not without the mother being sent to a labor camp for social disturbance. The affair made headlines in China.

purpose he might have derived from it. On the other hand, one could argue that his PI engagement started before his involvement in FL and other projects launched or co-launched by Deng Fei. While he refused concepts such as fairness, justice or human rights when arguing about his reasons to provide legal support for free, he did refer to social responsibility when discussing the success of FL, with children offering an easier point of rally than other social groups.

> Because I think it's the same in any country in the world with children. If you say that an adult has difficulties, people feel that he is either lazy, or that he has no ability (…). But it's not the same with a child, a child doesn't have the ability, she needs people to help. When her parents have no way to solve her problems, it becomes the responsibility of this society, this society is responsible. Then, each as us being a member of this society, aren't you also responsible? Of course, it may be a very very long process for love to rise to (the level of) responsibility. These people who are involved, if these people consider this is their own responsibility, then this society is fantastic (*feichang bang*), this society is fantastic. (20140109_HYH, p. 13)

He did not directly relate his PI involvement to a search for meaning, a point he had made when discussing his state of mind in 2010 after two years of intense concentration on his legal work. He preferred to invoke a less resounding reason for his engagement.

> That's how I am, I think I do things without purpose and goal. I think four characters are particularly suitable: do as you please (*sui xin suo yu*), because I consider this is a very good thing. And then, added to that, I was willing to participate at that time. Then I felt that doing it was right. Including those who participate now in FL, millions! I estimate that up to now, our donors may exceed... There may be one to two million people. (20140109_HYH, p. 12)
>
> (…)
>
> From a few yuan, from one yuan, from a few cents, that's how (those who donate money to FL) participate. The reasons and motivations for these participants are certainly different. But everyone wants to find their commonality, right? This may be what researchers or a lot of people quite want to know, the reason, why this bunch of people want to do this thing? Commonality. Of course, and this might not necessarily be right, but I think a lot of people may be like me, right? Do as you please. There is a large number (who participate) because of love. Then there is another part (that participates) probably because we know that in this society, everybody has roughly similar… [he thinks a few seconds] values about children, and we have all grown up from being a child. (20140109_HYH, p. 13)

He continued, hypothesizing human nature being a possible motivation for PI engagement among FL donors, or compassion or a rising sense of responsibility. Turning back to his own reasons, nothing seemed to provide such a strong impetus as the memory of these children he had faced three years earlier.

> I think it is like this, from my personal point of view. Maybe these last three years it's more (a sense of) responsibility that makes me feel I want to persist doing this thing. As I told you, this kind of commitment that day facing this group of children there, this promise makes you feel that this is already your responsibility. Because the children you face look at you with this sincere expression in their eyes, you stand on the stage and you tell them about this, that is your commitment to them. Then for you, this promise must be a responsibility, it's not love. If it's love, I can stop loving, right? (20140109_HYH, p. 13)

4.2.4 Identity narrative

Yihua's involvement did not decrease in the following years. In April 2017, he was spending about 60% of his time on PI-related activities, even more than in 2014. While stopping some of these activities, new responsibilities were piling up at the same time. One was the extension of FL to Africa (DBSA, March 24, 2017). Six schools were covered by the scheme at that time, providing lunches to 1,400 students in Kenya – of which approximately a hundred were said to have returned to school after the arrival of FL. Yihua oversaw the early stage of that international extension, which planned to launch more than ten national pilot projects with the support of international partners but without the participation of any Chinese governmental institutions.

He had explained at the beginning of the interview that he needed to make sense of his professional activity. He did not feel satisfied with the accumulation of successful cases and the increase of his incomes. But when he described his engagement in criminal cases to support individuals free of charge, the only notion related to sensemaking that he mentioned was responsibility. What his narrative left out though, was the reasons behind this sense of responsibility.

4.2.4.1 Identities

Yihua accumulated multiple responsibilities in and outside the Union. I learned about his new role in the expansion of FL in Africa during a WeChat exchange occurring shortly before two o'clock in the morning. He had landed in Beijing from Jiangxi, where he had flown with other PIPs for a poverty alleviation project not related to the Union. His international responsibilities had not substantially reduced his PI engagement in China. His commitment to PI had

long been tightly related to his legal expertise and his legal activities. He was recognized as a legal expert who could provide counsel and support in that area. He regularly reminded his interlocutors that he was a lawyer. Both identities were tightly related.

4.2.4.2 Motivations

I was surprised by the comparison Yihua made between love and responsibility in the quote cited above. I didn't ask Yihua at the time to explain what made love so different than a promise made to children, or whether love did not entail elements of responsibility as well. I was equally surprised by his insistence on responsibility as a critical factor. From his perspective, it seemed to constitute the most important factor. But it remained unclear to me which elements had generated such a sense of responsibility. He refused to associate his behavior with loftiness, a sense of justice or any intention to play a "human rights warrior." But an individual can hardly commit 50% to 60% of his busy schedule to causes that do not make profound sense to him, and that generate expenses that he partially covers himself. My interpretation was that through his engagement he built an identity and enacted a social role that filled him with a sense of purpose. But I could not extract more cues from his own narrative.

4.2.4.3 A special type of volunteer

Hu Yihua challenged my views regarding volunteers. I did not imagine that this level of commitment could be possible or that it could be sustained. The distinction between a professional and a volunteer PIP did not appear relevant in his case. Another person would soon challenge my overall conception of what I had started to call PI at the time, even if I hadn't formulated the difference between *gongyi* and *cishan* yet.

4.3 A social entrepreneur

I met Li Hua two weeks after my first meeting with Yihua, the second person I interviewed in the earliest stage of this research project. One of my first questions, before I started to record, was to ask her whether she was a Buddhist believer, due to the way she was clothed and her very short hair. She answered that her career and life choice had nothing to do with any religious elements.

4.3.1 A life-changing question

Earlier in her career, Li Hua had worked for more than ten years as an accountant in a state-owned enterprise (SOE). The company, which needed to cut its cost and its payroll, asked its employees if some would leave against a compensation. She accepted the offer. Her colleagues urged her to re-consider, thinking she was about to give up a "good" job – she dealt with features exchanges – guaranteeing her steady income. She preferred to leave instead.

> I chose to be laid off (*xiagang*), but it was because I thought this futures job was not what I wanted to do. I did not particularly like this kind of atmosphere, I thought this was a job to be done by a particularly smart person, I mean smart, not wise, not that, a very smart person. I thought I was really not meant to do that business, I chose to renounce. I took the layoff certificate, and then I started my own very small business, called New Harbor Household Management, (…) I wanted to do household management, at that time I saw there was a demand in compounds. (20140121_LH, p. 1)

An ex-colleague from her three-year time working on futures asked her why she had given up a job in which it was so easy to earn money no matter whether the transactions were generating profits or losses. She had never considered her decision from that perspective. She felt happy to work in areas that "made fun."

Soon after, she faced another question, one she could not answer just by invoking fun. She met a Taiwanese businessman who had retired in the early 2000s after having managed a large enterprise in China. He had become involved in PI activities a few years earlier following his retirement (20140121_LH, pp. 1-2).

> The most important was that I knew absolutely nothing about PI at the beginning. When I was forty, I met Mr. Bian, the founder of [name of his company] (…). (…) When I worked in an advertising company for three years, doing ads, films and TV, (…) I just thought it was fun to do at that time, I had no ideals. After meeting Mr. Bian, he asked me what I was doing. I told him I was a laid-off employee of a SOE. (20140121_LH, p. 1)

Mr. Bian asked her a question she had never asked herself before: what was she doing? And why? I.e., what sense did she ascribe to her work.

> Later he asked me - I think this was the turning point in my life - he asked me what is your goal in life? I was 40 years old at the time. I said that I really didn't have a goal in life, that his question was too big. I said I had to think about it. He said you are forty years old and you have no goals in life? I said I really didn't have any. I thought he would not want me (to work with him because) I didn't have any. He said nothing and let me in in his institution. I told him I hadn't studied at university, I was very eager to have a kind of instructor's guidance, then I wanted Mr. Bian to be my mentor. He said if that is possible, I can be your mentor. It turned out like that. I have been with Mr. Bian for a total of 12 years until now. I feel that I have really experienced a special [transformation], and this kind of [transformation happened] bit by bit, a kind of very slow change. It was not something disruptive, I think not.

In our communications, Li Hua often referred to gradual change as her preferred way to evolve. She could point to her own case and to the emotions that had accompanied her during this evolution.

> I feel that the kindness and that thing in my heart have been constantly extracted in these 12 years. That kind of enthusiasm has been there all along, and it's been preserved. I think it's because I found it, what I like to do, the thing I'm good at and that I like, combined together. Then I worked at [Mr. Bian's PIO]. I started volunteering in 1999 up to 2008. Starting from 2002, I was a staff member being paid, up to 2008. Then I went to another one, a public fundraising foundation, called the [name] Foundation, still doing finance, because they were temporarily short of people.
>
> They asked me to come to help them. I volunteered there for the first seven months, helping them doing their finances. Then I became a full-time staff member to help them, and I'm still helping them now. It was a PI foundation. In fact, PI foundations encounter a lot of difficulties in their operations. In terms of fundraising, of the completion of various indicators, there are actually many difficulties. (20140121_LH, p. 2)

4.3.2 Significant experiences

She highlighted other specific experiences and encounters as having profoundly changed the way she lived and what she wanted to achieve in her work.

> Later, we did two PI projects at [name of Mr. Bian's organization], one was called Big Friend, and the other Late Fate. Late Fate was about accompanying lonely old people in a nursing home (…). A volunteer was paired one-on-one with and old person, who became partners. The volunteer accompanied the old person through the last part of her life. I volunteered ten years for this project. Later, because I had to take care of my mother, who is 93 years old, I didn't go to the nursing home so much. (20140121_LH, pp. 2-3)
>
> I also took care of an old person living at home who was 93 years old, even older than my mother. In fact, this experience, this period of time, was really the biggest

> trigger in my life. I pondered the value of life, what is it we're living for. Actually, I still don't have a full answer now.

Li Hua told me that day that she could not answer Mr. Bian's question yet. But it seemed to me she had already found a clear direction, one that she had fostered in a very systematic way, as the next four years would demonstrate.

> I really feel I benefited (from these experiences). With these old people, especially the old people who are accompanied in their last days, when an old person is crying about his attachment to life, not giving up, when she can smile and say goodbye to the world, you suddenly feel that the value of this matter, you suddenly find that this thing really… It transcends religion, it is a kind of love, a kind of big love created by [Mr Bian's organization], unconditional love. (…) so, I think that religion is not the ultimate thing.

Li Hua's words were extremely powerful. While PIPs I would later come in contact with often spoke of "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) and other positive feelings such as love, only Li Hua described her involvement, such as her past volunteering experience in this passage, as capable of transcending religion.

> The reason we can sit here today, I think it also stems from human emotions, this kind of love. Recently, I took classes again, it is called the [name] University Hall. If you have the opportunity, you should meet the school principals. I think it is very different, they do another kind of PI. I think that teaching women, Chinese women, how to be a woman, to do that, I think in the end, all that is transmitted is love. In fact, (…) including the establishment of my organization, [name of her organization], the idea I propose is also love, trust (*xin*) and sincerity (*cheng*), this is love, infinite love (*da ai*). And you have to love this job, you have to hold it in awe in order to do well.
>
> Then I hope that through a mode of legacy (*chuancheng de fangshi*), these people of the next generation will be able to manage finance well. The two ladies who just sat in the office are my age, we're all from the year of the rat, 1960. We're like masters, looking after children of migrant workers, young girls who come to the city. We hope that this type of master-apprentice mentoring will bring them to a point where they have gained professional knowledge, professionalism, and, crucially, love, a (profession) with established practices. That's what we call dedication, specialization, professionalism, and professional enthusiasm. Ultimately, this professional enthusiasm is what brings them to a choice, we can't do it, they must experience it for themselves. We just lead them through the door, their future path depends on them. In the past three years, we have accompanied a total of thirty-seven girls like that. They went (to work) to enterprises, to NGOs. (20140121_LH, p. 3)

Li Hua was implementing in practice what she described as a mode of legacy. She identified herself as a mentor whose role was to train young women so that they could become competent professionals in the field of accounting. She wanted to empower these young women, as she wanted to empower PIOs to become more independent and competent in accounting.

4.3.3 Entrepreneurship

Following her exchanges with the businessman turned PIP, she first became a volunteer working on his projects, helping him to handle accounting matters. She then decided to set up an organization that would specialize in providing accounting services to PIOs, something that most PIPs are often ill-prepared to do. Her company was established in 2010, registered as a for-profit company under the Trade and Industry Bureau. She billed PIOs for her work, but her company's prices constituted only a fraction of the industry's standards, thus allowing PIOs to afford her services. She employed young women who underwent on-the-job training while studying at the same time to become trained accountants, starting from the lowest level. She viewed both her services to PIOs and on-the-job training of young women as important parts of her work.

She acknowledged in 2014 that her goal had only started to take shape several years after she started to work in the PI sector. She gradually began seeing a clear objective that she could achieve before retiring. She seemed highly satisfied with her choice, even if it implied limited revenues. She had already gained VIP status in the PI sector at that time, a status that was further cemented in the following years, with repeated participation in seminars and daily exchanges with other organizations. She mentioned love being a core motivation for most of what she had done, including earlier PI activities and her current work in her own organization.

I have met her on average twice a year since 2016. That year, she was in the process of creating a licensed network of offices across China, based on a management and operational model she had tested for years before considering the idea of helping other individuals who specialized in accounting and were eager to provide services to PIOs, as she had. This was one of the main conditions imposed on individuals who wanted to join her network: concentrate on PIOs and provide professional and highly-discounted services. Her network had already extended to 27 cities that year.

Another occasion to talk to Li Hua was at lunch time in Beijing in July 2017. A few persons accompanied her that day, all full-time PIPs working in different organizations. The other individuals started to discuss issues concerning their

work while Li Hua updated me about hers. The extension to other cities had come to a halt for about a year, but new cities were added soon after. She was still involved in a lot of trainings and business trips across China. These are the notes I wrote following lunch, after Li Hua and her peers were joined by an unexpected guest.

> Mr. Xu Yongguang dropped by unexpectedly. He sat at the end of the table and during the twenty minutes he sat with us, he was clearly the main speaker. Very strong personality, sharp ideas about PI and how it should be done. Heavy criticism of Jiang Yi (a PIP in the elderly care sector) who dismissed a 500-million-yuan capital investment by a Hong Kong company/organization that would have allowed him to expand his current operations into an incomparably bigger scope. But he refused to be "tainted" – Mr. Xu did not use that precise word, but according to his rendering, Jiang Yi wanted nothing to have with capital in order to retain the purity of his PI objectives – by this money, something that Xu Yongguang found unacceptable. He said that for him, wasting resources in the PI sector constituted the greatest sin. (I thought then that wasting in any area is no more justifiable than in the PI sector.) He explained that for him, like in a capitalist enterprise, the objective in PI is to exceed oneself, not to rest on one's laurels. I asked whether both positions could not be considered acceptable: aiming at continued growth or keeping a small size? For Mr. Xu, it was about creating social value, and that required to expand if you could afford to.
>
> According to what one of the other persons said once Mr. Xu had left, he has been advocating for some time that enterprises should include more PI objectives in their operations, while PI organizations should operate like enterprises, thus reducing the gap between the two sectors. And he sees PIPs like himself as bridges/connectors in-between these two areas. He clearly was the highlight of this lunch.
>
> I asked Li Hua to briefly introduce Jiang Yi after Xu Yongguang had left. She roughly agreed with his comments. Jiang Yi used to be a highly successful and respected figure in the PI sector until a few years ago, but he hasn't developed either his operations or his ideas recently. Li Hua is ideally placed to make this kind of comments as she sits on the advising or supervisory boards of a lot of PI institutions. She communicates with dozens of such institutions every month, keeping abreast of latest developments and hot topics.
>
> Together with two other persons today, part of the discussion during lunchtime concentrated on social enterprises. They quickly reached an agreement about the fact that no clear definition could be given about what constitutes a social enterprise in China in 2017 and that setting a legal frame to regulate such organizations today would probably do more harm than good. Zhang He said that social enterprises have only grown to become a visible social phenomenon in the last 3 to 4 years, so that there is very little practice and experience accumulated in that area to have a clear understanding of what they should be and how they should operate. He cited another person that had a different opinion though. That other person he was referring to would rather regulate that area as early as possible to avoid some organizations claiming to be social enterprises while actually operating without PI objectives. But Zhang He, Kong Meilan and Li Hua adopted a more pragmatic approach: give it another few years before setting guidelines, as any legal regulations also constitute a kind of restriction.

Xu Yongguang, the only person whose real name was used in the section above, was born in 1949. At the time of writing this thesis he was the Secretary-General and Chairman of the Narada Foundation, and the Vice-President of China Charity Alliance. He launched Project Hope when he served as secretary general of China Youth Development Foundation. At almost 70, he remains an influential personality in the PI sector. He was appointed as Research Fellow at the State Department's Counsellor's Office in 2015. He has promoted for several years a closer cooperation between businesses and PIOs, arguing that they should learn from each other (Xu, 2017). I am skeptical about the PI character of some corporations he cites in this book, such as those based on a sharing economy model. However, Xu Yongguang's argument that the gap between what is traditionally considered the corporate world and the PI sector is worth pondering. Li Hua provides an example of a social enterprise completely devoted to PI objectives that has succeeded in finding a sustainable model not requiring any donations.

4.3.4 Identity narrative

Since I first met her in 2016, Li Hua has displayed a growing clarity about her objectives. It seemed there was little doubt left in her mind about her choices and priorities. Her organization had developed to a point she had not even foreseen in early 2014. That extension did not mean increased revenues, as Li Hua only provided an operational standard not based on a licensed – and billable – model. The revenue figure she gave me in 2016 remained close to the one she had mentioned for the year 2013 during our first meeting. She was not driven by profit.

4.3.4.1 Identities

Li Hua is a social entrepreneur who relies on her accounting expertise to deliver services and counselling to social actors involved in the PI sector. These actors are government officials who need her opinions and suggestions about finance-related procedures in the PI sector; PIPs who are confused about

accounting requirements and want to avoid making mistakes; corporations that are setting up foundations or that intend to work with PIOs on some specific projects; individuals who want to provide similar services and want to learn from her experience; young women who consider accounting as a possible profession; etc. She acts as a kind of intermediary between all these actors, sharing with them the knowledge that she has gained from practice.

4.3.4.2 Motivations

She called herself and her two other colleagues mentors. Mentoring qualifies most of what she does in her work and in her interactions with other social actors. She mentors young women who try their hands at basic accounting before making a choice about their future orientation. She guides other accountants who want to establish a practice based on her model. She advises government officials who regulate or administer PIOs in financial matters. She encourages PIOs to come to terms with accounting subtleties. She constantly advocates for good practices in the PI sector through her public interventions during forums and other similar interactions.

4.3.4.3 Professionalism combined with joy

Li Hua insisted that all these activities should be conducted with as much professionalism as fun and joy. As quoted above, she explained how she had maintained a high degree of enthusiasm for her work over more than ten years: “I think it’s because I found it, what I like to do, the thing I’m good at and that I like, combined together.” The joy she referred to could be felt in all her interactions, at least those I witnessed.

Individuals such as Deng Fei, Hu Yihua and Li Hua led me to question the perceptions and understanding of PIPs I brought into this research. They also raised questions about similarities and differences between volunteer and full-time PIPs, including social entrepreneurs, and the reasons that motivated these individuals to engage in PI activities. Of those I met during this research,

Hu Yihua was the most extreme case of a volunteer dedicating a substantial amount of his time and energy to PI activities. He was not the only one. Lan Yaoli worked for half-a-year as a full-time PIP before she accepted the idea of receiving a small salary for her commitment (20160521_LYL). Like Li Hua, Liu Huimin established her own SE, setting PI objectives but relying on a commercial business model, following her work for a private foundation in the previous four years (20161114_LHM). Li Wan joined a SE as a partner after almost three years of experience in three different PIOs (20170328_LW). You Yunchuan was an active FL volunteer for several years before joining a PIO as a full-time practitioner for the first time in his life at the age of forty-seven. Cheng Feifei spent more time working as an FL volunteer for four years during her university years than she spent on studying her major. After joining a private company upon graduation, she started an original experience in 2018: her new employer struck an agreement with Deng Fei's Union, under which she would work full-time for and at the Union for one year, while her full salary would be paid by her employer. Feifei would concentrate on improving some operational aspects of the Union. The objective is to learn from each other: the corporation wants to increase its PI involvement while the Union is aware of its poor management and wants to improve the way it is run.

Working as PIPs has contributed to shaping the identities of these individuals, which has been the focus of this chapter. Rather than constructing an independent "PI identity," it is probably more accurate to understand PI features as having permeated other aspects of their lives. In the same manner, other areas of their lives have influenced their PI activities and the way they conduct these activities. These characteristics, which applied to some of the participants I met, such as those evoked in this chapter, led me to challenge the three categories of the civil society framework. An entrepreneur might be a party member or an official who, having "jumped into the sea" (*xiahai*, a word used for party or government officials who left their positions to enter the private sector), and who keep close contacts with party or government officials. A celebrity might have a high rank in the Chinese army and specialize in military roles, while advertising for numerous brands and earning substantial incomes through that latter channel. A media worker is ideally positioned to act as a boundary spanner between social

organizations and government officials. The latter might otherwise be more reluctant to establish contacts with the former (20151114_WHW). The list of actors who arguably belong in more than just one of the civil society categories does not stop here. I suggest that exploring the motivations of the actors engaged in PI, rather than thinking in dualist terms and opposing different social groups, is more conducive to making sense of their involvement and to comprehend some features of their identities, as I have done in this chapter. In the next chapter, I delve more deeply into factors that triggered the PI engagement of this research's participants, and into cues that reflect the values they abide by.

Chapter 5 Aiming High: Motivations and Values of PIPs

In the previous chapter, I introduced the first individuals I met when starting this research project. I showed how, through their PI participation, they gradually constructed a role they identified with. The foundations of their PI engagement, and subsequently of their built identity, are not laid on a sense of opposition to or conflict toward authorities or governmental institutions, but rather on an action-oriented purpose. These individuals decided to become involved in initiatives aimed at improving the situation of social groups, e.g. school children in poor rural areas or, as in the case of Li Hua, PIOs that are often helpless in the face of accounting requirements they have not been trained to handle adequately. The reasons of their engagement vary from individual to individual, but some common features can be identified. These characteristics are discussed and analyzed in this chapter. Starting from a foundational pursuit of sense and the search for personal development, I then move towards axiological concerns. A few core values can be recognized in the narratives of PIPs who participated in this research. These values frame the sense they ascribe to their participation and, consequently, the sense that can be attributed to PI activities. I advance in the conclusion of this chapter that values, i.e. axiological concerns, should be integrated in the general framework of sensemaking.

5.1 In Pursuit of Sense

In organizational studies, the sensemaking process helps organizations and their members to readjust to environments in which past practices do not seem adapted anymore. A crisis constitutes the most likely scenario forcing an organization to question its practices and worldview and re-assess which adjustments should be made to adapt to a changed context. A crisis may also constitute an event that compels some individuals to re-assess the state of affairs they experience, ultimately resulting in operating some changes. The result of such changes may lead to becoming a PIP. But it is only one option in an array of possibilities, or a combination of possibilities.

Some individuals turn to PI because of their personal situations, with PI possibly offering the only viable alternative that can imbue some sense into their lives and help them cope with dramatic issues. Others turn to PI because of an event that they identify as a milestone triggering their engagement. It might be an encounter, as we have seen in Chapter 3 with Li Hua. That encounter might provide an individual who had already raised questions about the meaningfulness of his professional life with an opportunity for PI involvement, as was the case for Hu Yihua. It might also trigger doubts about maintaining the same course one had been following for years or even decades. Some PIPs explain that they felt at an early stage, i.e. their childhood or teenage years, that they were meant to help others. Entering the PI sector presented them with this possibility. In some other cases, no identifiable elements hinted that these individuals would become full-time PIPs. Even in such cases, the process of sensemaking is at work. Some of these factors, or rather a combination of these factors, constitute the most important reasons of an individual's PI engagement.

5.1.1 Compelled by personal situations

Some individuals turn to PI because it offers them a viable path to cope with difficulties in their lives. Two such cases are well illustrated by Pei Yanni, who set up her own PIO to support autistic and mentally handicapped children, and Ye Bo, who established an organization helping hemophiliac people like himself.

5.1.1.1 Because of her son

Pei Yanni quickly noted that her son was different than other children. But no doctor could tell her what the problem was. When she went to hospital with her son in the provincial capital where she had been living for more than two decades, doctors advised treatments that bore no relation to her son's condition and only contributed to reducing Pei Yanni's savings. It was not until she watched a TV program when her son was four years old that she finally understood his condition. During the program a father explained the case of his child. Pei Yanni cried as she watched the man describe the condition of his child,

knowing that that was the problem facing her own son. This was later confirmed in a competent hospital in the capital.

Pei Yanni had felt alone in the world before finally realizing that many families faced the same problem. Most never dared to take their child out of their apartments, suffering from the same ignorance she had experienced for four years, without the possibility of sharing with anyone. Recounting these circumstances, she started to cry shortly after the interview started. She cried for most of the first hour. Literally hoping to bring a touch of sweetness in the interview, I asked her at an early point whether she wanted some honey with a snack she was eating. She answered that there was "no need, no need, I'm already used to live in bitterness (*shenghuo yijing ku guan le*), so… I'm used to it" (20161023_PYN, p. 7).

She joined several institutions to improve the condition of her child, first as a patient, then as a practitioner. But none relied on a method she found adequate for children suffering from autism. She decided to establish her own organization, based on the model of the very first similar organization created in China in 1993 to provide care and support to autistic children and their families. This is how she described how she joined a new organization in 2012, before setting up her own:

> It is an institution for people with intellectual disabilities. Together with my child, we joined (name of the organization) in 2012. I was responsible for young children. We joined (the organization) at the same time, but when I really joined it, and found out about their model and all its aspects, I thought this might not be where I wanted to stay, neither was it where my child wanted to grow. Parents probably often expect too much, then it turned out that I saw a few things, and I felt that my child would be delayed in staying there. So, in 2014, also because with the leadership… Because my idea was that you could invite a lot of professional teachers to do these things, but (you should) not provide a nanny-like service to save cost. So, I chose to do it on my own, to do a few things according to my ideas.
>
> After 2014... After 2015, I established my own (name of her organization) Special Children Service Center.
>
> (…)
>
> We were five at the time, we created the current organization together. It's fair to say that my engagement in the PI sector is because of my son, that's why I accomplished my ideas today. (20161023_PYN, p. 5, 14:22)

Her "ideas" didn't only entail operating an organization founded on her conception of how to best provide care and support to mentally handicapped

children. It also included her old dream of becoming a teacher, a dream that preceded becoming a mother. Her wish was finally fulfilled, if not in the way she had imagined. To the thirty children her organization helped, and their families, she played the role of a teacher-mentor who helped them cope with a difficult reality. In the end, even the "bitterness" of her son's condition and the way it had influenced her life ended up making sense.

5.1.1.2 No other option

Like Pei Yanni, Ye Bo felt alone in the world for many years. He did not choose PI as a career. It was the only option he had ever had. Suffering from hemophilia and sitting in a wheelchair since he was a child, he could not attend school, he never had a chance to pursue a formal education and he had no opportunities in the labor market. Among all the PIPs I came across, Ye Bo was the most obvious case of an individual who chose this path for deeply personal reasons. The only option that finally presented itself to him when he was 29, it allowed him for the first time in his life to become independent and self-sufficient, with a sense of purpose and objectives to pursue.

> You want to know why I am (working in the public interest sector)? (…) No choice, because there are no other opportunities to choose. This thing is not a career that I have well planned since 1999 or 2000, I went step by step to reach today. In the future, I may see more and more things, as I develop step by step. It's not like in 1999 I thought Ye Bo would be the president of [name of his association], he would do this and that. I did not think I would do PI, (I planned) none of this. My body determined that I could only do very little and that I had to find something suitable I could do. Then you do it. Whether you can do it well, I don't know. But now I see myself as doing not too badly, not too badly. Because now, with the accumulation of experience, this institution has grown from one person to a lot of people, it has gradually expanded and developed. Now when we hold an annual meeting, there are more than 100 people coming from local organizations, so it is growing. People's acknowledgement of our resources and their degree of recognition are all rapidly improving. If I chose a career again, I might not choose a PI organization, but today I can only choose my present job, it's not my choice. (20170314_YB, pp. 11-12)

Following this statement, I asked him what his choice would be "if you could choose (your career) again?"

> I don't know, I never thought about it. I think people should not see most careers as bringing an aura (*guanghuan*). To me, this is my work, moreover, it's a work that I have, gradually, single-handedly managed, as if it were a child. I haven't seen anybody doing a better job than me – I'm bragging. When someone is able

> to have his own profession, when this profession brings an income, and you love that profession, which argument is there not to do it well? This is why I feel I'm very lucky. (20170314_YB, p. 12)

He completely embraced the only option he was ever presented with. He spoke with passion about a future in which PIOs like his might provide advice to reform the medical system. He was thankful about the chance of managing a PIO, he saw his work as a mission to improve lives of hemophiliac people through long-term advocacy. He had grown and thrived through his work to become a driven individual – even if he saw himself as a poor manager with bad leading skills – mulling causes worth fighting for over the next one or two decades. After twenty-nine years of doubts and difficulties, everything in his life had gradually fallen into place. It all started to make sense.

5.1.2 An identifiable milestone

Other individuals turn to PI after experiencing an epiphany-like moment, an identifiable event they remember clearly that constituted a milestone in their decision be become a PIP. In the two following cases, such events were triggered after reading or watching media reports.

5.1.2.1 On the importance of media (1)

Cheng Feifei was a committed FL volunteer for six years. In 2018, she started to work full-time for the Union while being remunerated by a private enterprise, an experiment that was to last for one year. In an article that she published in 2016 she reflected on the four years of volunteer work that led to her FL engagement. She was starting her final senior high school year at the time, less than a year before the all-important *gaokao*. Her engagement started after she passed the *gaokao*.

> A news magazine that had started to circulate in the first group (of my class) finally arrived in my hands after a long time. I have long forgotten the cover of that issue and what was top news at that time, but there was a description inside which, I think, will remain fixed indelibly in my memory in this life: in northwest China, a young boy who had just started the first grade of elementary school, was unwilling to eat a boiled egg distributed by his school at lunch. He hid it in his pocket and said he wanted to bring it back to share with his family. A big string of

> numbers I had read before did not leave any emotion, but the description of this scene left me brimming with tears.
>
> The text of this scene read at that time has surfaced in my mind countless times days and nights since then. It also affected all my later decisions. Yes, it was the first time I heard of "Free Lunch," I was deeply touched, I vaguely knew that I would surely have a relationship with this PI project in the future. Unfortunately, due to the pressure of the *gaokao*, I did not immediately contact FL to become a volunteer. (17 May 2016 article)

5.1.2.2 On the importance of media (2)

Zhang Li experienced a similar moment when watching a TV program at his university's canteen. The main protagonist of the short documentary film was a hemophiliac teenager who could not walk normally. He talked of unbearable suffering during regular crises, of not being able to walk normally and of not attending school like other children his age. I asked Zhang Li how important he thought that TV program had been regarding his subsequent choice of working in the PI sector.

> Yes, very important. Because without the video of this child as a starting point, nothing would have happened later, we may not have met here today, I may not have come to (name of city). I think this was really a butterfly effect. If I had not eaten at the canteen at that time, I may not have seen that video, I might have missed it. Maybe Heaven arranged it.
>
> (…)
>
> I think I wanted to do something for this child, and then after I watched this film I urgently wanted to contact the child's family. I just wanted to help them, yes, although I thought my ability [to do so] may be limited, I might not be able to help at all, but this idea [of helping] was very, very strong. (20161122_ZL, pp. 19-20)

He did contact the family, becoming a close friend of the teenager in the next months and years. He started to organize an event to raise awareness about hemophilia on his campus. Some local media covered the event and a few hemophiliac persons attended. Zhang Li did not know at the time that he had started a path that would lead him several years later to become a professional PIP in Ye Bo's organization.

Other participants I interviewed talked about events that proved crucial in leading to their PI engagement. For Li Hua, whom I have evoked in Chapter 4, such a moment materialized when she met a retired Taiwanese businessperson. For Liu Huimin, who created a SE in 2016 after working four years for a private

foundation, her advertising graduation project for that foundation would result in her joining upon graduating. Though these events proved vital in sparking PI interest, they do not explain in themselves the motivations that led these individuals to start their PI engagement. Their importance lies in being identified by PIPs as a milestone of the sensemaking process that they have gone through.

5.1.3 Destined to be a PIP

A few participants identified elements of their personality or personal stories as constituting essential reasons for their PI engagement. They felt that the origins of this involvement could be found in quasi-primeval factors. Something had existed since they were a child that pushed them to take this path.

5.1.3.1 Father figure and fate

Her father played an essential role in Guo Zuquan's sensemaking process. She didn't center her narration on her father for a long time, but I interpreted his role as being central to her choices to study social labor then pursue a PI career.

> My father, with his personality, he really loved to help others. My personality is very similar to my dad's, it's especially... How to say it? He worked in a company, then he would go home and to our village. If a family had a broken lamp [then he would fix it]. He was an electrician, a bit like a volunteer, there wasn't any income. In fact, he was very busy at work. But once at home, if someone else needed help in their house, he would run there to help others without eating. Sometimes, he would go on business trips, then come back home, sitting down for an instant and there again, he would run out to help others. So, he was very warmhearted. His accident was actually to help someone... (20161106_GZQ, p. 3)

The dramatic death of her father marked a clear boundary between a happy childhood and troubled times. Returning home with a colleague, a truck bumped into their motorbike. He asked the young men, who had stolen the lorry from their factory, for a ride to take his badly-injured colleague to a hospital. Instead, the young men drove him and his colleague to a remote place and murdered them. The family and community pillar was gone, but not the ideal of helping others.

Several years later, entering university, Zuquan found herself studying social labor because she failed to obtain high marks at the *gaokao*, as was the case for her entire cohort. Virtually none of the students who began to study social work with her for four years had any interest in the subject. Unlike them, she set herself the task of seriously studying the specialty. Her interest grew over time. She became the only member of the whole cohort who opted for PI-related work upon graduation. None chose social work as his or her career. "I think it's probably this specialty which has chosen me [she laughs]" and not the reverse (20161106_GZQ, pp. 5-6). She attributed her PI engagement to fate, to a choice she had not made purposefully, but one she learned to accept and even to embrace as her studies advanced. Ten years later, she did not regret that development.

5.1.3.2 Leaps of fate

Lan Tian provided one of the most impressive examples of sensemaking narrative among the research participants, a well-organized story that started in her teen years and stretched until her first steps in a PIO, the same organization where she was still working in 2018, eight years later. The following passage constituted an impressive example of self-reflection and/or self-construction, in which she gave a comprehensive account of the steps that led her to her current situation. It started with her first job, after she had studied chemistry in a technical school (*zhongzhuan*). Apart from her studies, decided by her parents because she had no idea of the direction to take at the age of fifteen, the story she told me unfolded to a conclusion that seemed inevitable.

> It was my first year working... I learned chemistry. Chemistry is about doing some small tests, analyze some ingredients, such as this biscuit. I tested how much sugar there was inside, and the quantity of this and that. But my first job was in a cement plant, it produced cement. They came to our school to recruit, saying they wanted to recruit five people to work in their lab. I didn't understand anything at that time, I just went to the interview with five girls from my dormitory, and then went to this factory. That plant was very remote, a cement factory, I don't know if you've seen one before? Cement plants used to be very poorly equipped, with gray sky and grey soil, and dust everywhere.

Lan Tian's description was so vivid that I almost felt like I was in the factory breathing dust and watching her work.

> It was a welfare factory, i.e. there were more than one hundred handicapped people in the plant with all kinds of disabilities, every day you saw all kinds of disabled people. We were working in three shifts there, which means there was a day shift and a late shift, this kind of changing shifts. There is a shift called the night shift, that is, from 11 o'clock in the evening to 7 o'clock in the morning. How were these shifts? Every day our work was like this, every hour at fixed times, we had to go to the workshops to take samples and bring them back for tests to see if the ingredients were right, otherwise they would have to be adjusted. Our job was to take samples every hour.
>
> During every night shift, we had to go through a 200-meter long corridor, very black. We were only 19-, 20-year-old girls, walking through such a very long and pitch-dark corridor, going to a very dark thundering workshop to collect samples. Personally, I am easily frightened, so my experience this year cast a big shadow in my mind. Later I often had nightmares in which I dreamt I was back working in that place, collecting samples again [she laughs]. But at that time, because we had a job and incomes, we stayed, and we did not think about leaving. Because there was a fixed income and I felt I could help my family, I felt very happy. A year later... I still left after working more than nine months, taking physical factors into account, there was too much dust [she chuckles].

The dust was not just in the air. She had successfully described a situation with little or no perspective, one that matched the worst associations one can make with the industrial world of factories. She was telling the story of her origins, how she had started to work in a hardly human environment, the beginning of her reflection on what kind of person she wanted to be, and what kind of work she wished to do.

> I think, hmm, after graduation when I came out to work, I took all kinds of detours for several years, or let's say it was a tiring walk. Maybe it has a lot to do with me having just graduated and being too young at that time... It was more like an instinctive way of doing a few things without thinking… So, I constantly ran into walls. I think I probably really started to think about the meaning of work when I was 23- or 24-year-old.
>
> I'm not saying that I started to think about the meaning of life, it's just that I began to understand the things I could obtain through this work, how I could develop. At the very beginning I only thought this is just a job, the earliest instinct was that this job I'm doing, it gives me a salary, I can eat this month, or I can send a bit of money back home, that simple. Later I began to feel like are there development prospects in this work I'm doing, what can I learn, this amounted to another leap. In fact, I think there were a few leaps in my work in more than ten years. One was in that period when I muddled along, from 19 to 23 or 24, I must have been 24 at that time.

The plot here is one of growth, of a person who gradually awakes to her own needs, who succeeds, step by step, in going forward and advancing towards an ultimate goal.

> As a salesperson, I started to jump from my original, kind of very simple work, to one where I had to begin to communicate with people a lot, salesperson, all kinds of stress, I began a job with pressure. Because I was doing lab tests (in my first

> two jobs, so) there was no pressure. Once the tests were done, the whole process, then it was over (…). But as a salesperson, you had to start thinking about your own work (…). Because I came into contact with many people, I started to become mature a first time, that was a stage. Then the second mutation was probably when I came to (name of the organization), this was a great leap. I joined (name of the organization) at 26 as a volunteer. So, in my life there was a leap at 19, another at 24, and another leap started at 26. (20161101_LT, pp. 5-7)

Lan Tian traced this urge to help others to her childhood (see "empathy" in the next section on PIPs' values). Her childhood wish to help others, which she felt powerless to fulfill at the time, quieted for a few years after graduation when she started to work. But it did not take long for this "need" to re-appear. She felt compelled to act upon it. She retrospectively made sense of her whole personal development, identifying three important steps in her evolution, steps that could only lead to one forgone conclusion, i.e. her PI engagement.

5.1.4 Apparent randomness

In some cases, PI engagement looked random at first sight, with no particular indications that an individual would veer into PI territory. But a closer narrative analysis reveals that the sensemaking process is at work, as illustrated by Lan Yaoli's example. She became a volunteer after she started to use *weibo*. Her motivation to set a *weibo* account was to follow the online quarrels of stars. She had virtually never heard of PI, nor did she have any interest in or knowledge about the sector or what volunteering was about. She was equally ignorant about the project that sought volunteers in her city, even suspicious for a very long time about the fact that a project could truly offer free lunches to children in rural schools.

> (...) it was Yao Chen at the time, she was fighting with others on *weibo* every day, it was particularly interesting. I wanted to apply for a Sina *weibo* account to watch stars quarreling. I was bored, I had just resigned, and I was taking a break. I first worked in a driving school for half a year, then I resigned. I was ready to partner with friends when I ended up on Sina *weibo*, watching stars quarrel. Volunteers were being recruited in the same city, I thought being a volunteer was very interesting. We saw so many volunteers in 2008, that was so splendid. There were volunteers for the Olympic Games, for the earthquake. I felt that was especially good, especially good, I wanted to be a volunteer. However, my concept about volunteers probably was a group of people helping to move things somewhere, making up a number, it was particularly unprofessional. At that time, I thought being a volunteer was very interesting, I wanted to be a volunteer. Later I could show off that I had been a volunteer.

> (..)
>
> It was a weibo account in the same city, (name of the city), saying that FL was recruiting volunteers for something like visiting [schools]. I thought this was quite interesting, but I didn't know what FL was, then I searched on Baidu. There was very few news (about FL) on Baidu at that time, it was a project about lunches, a project initiated by Deng Fei. There was no institution, no application either, nothing. I hadn't been a volunteer, I thought this project had to be very big, a grand project, I wanted to be a volunteer. As a result, I went and met with (name of the volunteer), who was recruiting. (20160521_LYL, p. 9)

I struggled during the interview to comprehend how she could have started volunteering for a project she knew so little about, a project she even felt suspicious about. With hindsight, I interpreted her wish to be a volunteer and "show off" about that experience as a first step to insert some sense in her life, following a year in which she had tried different jobs without becoming really interested in any of them. None provided a long-term perspective. She was looking to take actions that would be more meaningful than her previous attempts. She had explained earlier in the interview that she quit her first job, teaching children in remote rural schools, the one she had been trained for, because she realized while sitting in a bus that she had been completely cut from the world – and stars quarreling on *weibo* – for three months, the time she had been a teacher. She decided that this was not the life she wanted.

She contacted the local FL volunteer and started her participation in the project. Her task consisted of looking for potential schools that could be covered by the scheme. She received very little guidance regarding how she should go about that search. She even shared some of the suspicion expressed by some of the individuals she contacted about the project.

> The teacher didn't believe it either. Let's not talk about the teacher not believing, even I did not believe it, because I hadn't seen any money, I didn't know this project.
>
> (…)
>
> Before I started to eat at the first school, before the money was allocated and turned into a lunch, I could not believe it during that stage.
>
> *Q: Then why did you start at all?*
>
> Because I thought this was a good thing.
>
> (20160521_LYL, p. 10)

Her eagerness to engage in meaningful actions surpassed her doubts about the project. Her engagement quickly exceeded what any organization would expect from a volunteer. That first involvement led her to enter the PI sector. Seven

years later, she was an experienced PIP who did not contemplate leaving the sector. While she admitted that this outcome would have been unthinkable at that time, she drew the following conclusion:

> Maybe, in some of my later experiences, I felt like I was a born PIP - it sounds like I'm bragging. I think it's possible that one day, I may not be doing FL anymore, but I will not leave the PI sector, that's the idea. (20160521_LYL, p. 21)

5.1.5 Sensemaking at work

In this section, I delved into the factors that resulted in individuals starting their PI engagements. The different cases presented above illustrate how sensemaking contributes to offering reasonable explanations about a PIP's choices and actions. At one end of the spectrum, it constructs a comprehensive narrative that leaves no or little place for doubts or questioning. Lan Tian, and to a lesser extent Guo Zuquan, identified elements of their childhood and early personalities that destined them to become PIPs. Their narratives did not comprise surprising elements, they progressed instead in a predictable way, leaving an impression of inevitability. Lan Yaoli's case represented the other end of the spectrum. Her narrative did not show early signs of PI predispositions. On the contrary, she stressed her doubts and hesitations during the earliest stage of her engagement. Her narrative reached the same conclusion of certainty though, giving sense to apparent randomness, organizing in a reasonable way a personal history of engagement that was anything but predictable. In Pei Yanni and Ye Bo's cases, PI engagement offered a solution to their life situations. Their pasts did not make sense, but PI engagement provided the opportunity to build sense into their pasts, which had been characterized by hopelessness, loneliness and pain. Sensemaking cannot always provide a comprehensive interpretation of one's PI engagement, but it can certainly point to important cues, as demonstrated by Cheng Feifei and Zhang Li. These cues constitute a foundation on which the sensemaking process can rely for further construction.

After having identified some of the reasons advanced by PIPs to make sense of their PI involvement, I review in the next section the most important axiological concerns that appeared in their narratives. These concerns, which crystalize into

values, lie at the heart of their "version of reality" (Shealy, 2016, p. 4) or Weltanschauung.

5.2 PI Values

The three values presented below constitute ideal types, not absolute types. They don't constitute the complete value system of the PIPs who participated in this research. They were the most easily-identifiable value-related attributes in participants' narratives, ideas that played a major role in their identities and sensemaking processes. PIPs expressed their belief to abide by these values and the principles that they conveyed, attempting to reproduce them in their daily work, even if PIPs regularly face situations where encountered realities diverged from wished ideals (see next chapter).

5.2.1 Responsibility

One of the most frequently recurring axiological concerns of PIPs is responsibility. It was the easiest value to identify among participants, and the most directly referred to linguistically (*zeren*). Participants repeatedly mentioned a sense of responsibility, towards society in general, such as the two volunteers mentioned in 4.1.1, or towards a particular group of individuals, such as Hu Yihua's engagement towards rural children (4.2.2, 4.2.3). PIPs did not always directly use the term 'responsibility,' but they frequently referred to it in explaining their choices. Cao Jin explained his selection of journalism as a university major because it meant "reporting and supervising social issues" (20151013_CJ, p. 14), thus demonstrating his social responsibility. Pei Yanni's responsible behavior towards her staff constituted an essential reason for their loyalty towards her organization. A heavy sense of responsibility finally led Lan Yaoli to opt for PI as a career (see next section). Participants' responsibility was most often expressed in relation to their PI engagement. But, even if this is not the focus of this chapter, it is also worth mentioning that they regularly displayed a more individualistic or family-centered sense of responsibility, e.g., in terms of

personal growth, future career development, and their ability to materially contribute to their families, a recurrent concern of PIPs.

5.2.1.1 Multiple layers of responsibility

Two volunteers I met while interviewing Deng Fei for the first time referred to their sense of social responsibility for participating in a PI initiative. They felt that as journalists, it was inherent to their profession. They also spoke of Chinese culture as a reason for their sense of responsibility, thus identifying a sectorial and a socio-cultural dimension. Hu Yihua suggested that it lay at the heart of his PI engagement, refusing any "lofty" labels, preferring instead to anchor his involvement in responsibility. He felt he owed his engagement to children, following the promise he made when the first school was covered in 2011. In a similar way, he felt responsibility towards the individuals he supported for free through their legal procedures. He also assimilated responsibility with the quality of a society, using the word "great" or "fantastic" (*bang*) to qualify a society in which individuals would feel it their own responsibility to act in order to solve problems such as the one addressed by FL. He directly referred to children, the beneficiaries of FL, as those for whom responsibility should be felt. Lan Yaoli, also related to FL, held a similar discourse.

> In fact, I was separated from my boyfriend for a time while doing this[16], I kept going to schools in 2012, continuously creating misunderstandings. The two of us were separated for two years, but we were still together after that. For me, if I still keep my original attitude, if I keep working for FL, it's really not for this safe salary. I really want to do this PI matter now because of the children, for the expression I see in their eyes, the expression in their eyes that I remember. In fact, I don't care much about the amount of the wages, but at least it's not something I worry about now, I'm doing other things on the sideline. I have a husband, he can support our family's expenses. (20160521_LYL, p. 25)

Lan Yaoli felt responsibility toward children. Hu Yihua called for a sense of duty toward social groups suffering from issues that they cannot solve on their own. The same sense of duty was evoked by a person who represented local volunteers during the fourth anniversary of FL in 2015. She explained that one of the main reasons she participated in the scheme was to instill a sense of social responsibility to her twelve-year-old boy.

[16] Searching for new schools to be included in the Free Lunch scheme.

But at an individual level, responsibility may constitute a burden, almost an affliction, that prevents some PIPs from detaching themselves from their current engagement and considering instead other professional opportunities. Lan Yaoli illustrated that case.

> (That award) was particularly weighty, it is also because I received this award that I couldn't disengage (from my work). At that time, I thought I hadn't done anything to deserve such blessing, going to CCTV with Deng Fei and take such a prize. After receiving the award and coming back, I was in such a confused state of mind. There were also small partners and volunteers, because at that period, we covered five schools in half-a-year, I hadn't done many other things yet, and then I got this prize. It was particularly heavy, I thought that the responsibility on my shoulders was particularly heavy, having won that prize. It was really not something I could give up, it was pushing me all the way. (20160521_LYL, p. 22)

She faced a dilemma after receiving this national prize. She had first worked intensely for five months as a volunteer, before reluctantly becoming a full-time PIP, something she neither wanted nor imagined she would ever do. Before receiving that prize, she had intended to leave FL and start a new job in the private company. But she now felt compelled to pursue her PI engagement, among other reasons, because she received a prize on national television, even though she did not deem herself a worthy recipient.

5.2.1.2 An efficient sensemaking device

The cases cited above present two common factors. First, PIPs evoked responsibility to justify the choices they made. Second, that justification provided a foundation for action. Both factors echo Rokeach's assimilation of a value to a single belief providing guidance to actions and judgments, as indicated in Chapter 2. In conjuring responsibility, PIPs set an imperative to act, "a standard or yardstick to guide actions, attitudes, comparisons, evaluations, and justifications of self and others" (Rokeach, 1972, p. 160). Responsibility is a strong bond between social actors that constitutes an efficient sensemaking device. For PIPs, it potentially strengthens not only their engagement with colleagues and their organizations, but also with the disadvantaged groups they support, possibly even with society as a whole, in a way similar to what Hu Yihua described above. It may also restrain an individual from focusing on her sole interests and considering instead wider circles of interests not restricted to

his or her own person. As such, it validates decisions that might otherwise seem difficult to comprehend, an important factor in the face of the lack of legitimation of the whole PI sector (see Chapter 6).

5.2.2 Empathy

When referring to empathy, explanations often point to three different types: cognitive, emotional and compassionate (Håkansson, 2003). The cognitive level refers to intellectual understanding of emotions felt by others. The emotional level implies a direct sensation of another person's feelings. Compassionate empathy includes the first two levels, but it also includes the drive to act to help others. Compassion, as well as sympathy, is often associated with empathy, i.e. a concern for others' well-being, the wish to see them happier (Batson, 2009; Håkansson, 2003).

Participation in PI activities supposes an interest in causes that go beyond the simple satisfaction of personal needs. It requires empathy on the side of PIPs. That does not mean that no selfish or purely individual elements are involved. It has long been debated whether empathy relies more on altruism than on the pursuit of rewards for oneself. It may also be caused by the need to reduce one's own distress when witnessing the pain experienced by another person. It may be a way to gain public attention, acknowledgement and respect for one's seemingly altruistic behavior (Stueber, 2018). I do not intend to take a side in that debate, but rather to listen to PIPs' own interpretations regarding their PI involvement, its causes and what they say about their underlying motivations.
Liu Huimin's was the only participant who directly used the term "empathy" during an interview, first in English, then immediately translating in Chinese (*gonqing*). She referred to her education and the fact that her mother often asked her to put herself in others' shoes. She narrated two episodes that re-shaped some of her views and illustrated an empathetic approach. After volunteering for two months as a teacher in a rural area, she asked herself how useful that experience had been for the children she taught. She could easily see the value of that experience for herself and other volunteers in her situation. But she had deep doubts about any improvement it would bring to children's future when

considered from their perspective. The second episode, described in 5.2.2.2., involved her visit of an organization helping handicapped children, especially mentally handicapped ones. Prior to her visit, she had doubted their lives made any sense. She gained a new understanding of their lives during these few days, one that, based on her narrative, I would place somewhere between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy does not amount to empathy. But her reference to her mother's education principles, the ideals of "creating greater social value" she had pursued as a student, her thoughts about rural children and her changed views about mentally handicapped people, all these elements convinced me that empathy was an appropriate value to qualify the motivations that had led her to start a PI career and then found a social enterprise.

I only mention two PIPs in the next section, Liu Huimin being one of them. Lan Tian's empathy is directed towards rural children. But other examples could be provided. Pei Yanni explained that she hired two parents to work constantly with her staff, "because I gradually found out that if you have not experienced this bitterness, you will not understand the parents' sadness. When you really understand this bitterness, you'll do all these things with your whole heart" (20161023_PYN, pp. 14-15). This passage illustrated concisely the three different types of empathy identified by Håkansson. Staff members had to understand cognitively and emotionally what parents experienced in order to feel the drive to help them.

5.2.2.1 Seeing oneself in the others

Lan Tian had wished to help others long before becoming an adult. Possibly induced by my questions, she associated her choice of a PI career with her childhood. The first concrete example she recalled about this strong wish was related to blood donation.

> So, if it is about tracking the origin of (my participation in) PI, … it is certainly related to my childhood... Because I obtained the support of others when I was a child, I started to slowly, slowly having a strong notion as I was growing up, I wanted to grow up and I wanted to help others. But I never told others about this, that was just one sentence to myself in my heart, I want to help others. I didn't know how to help when I was a child, and I was powerless. A vehicle came to school to collect blood, I felt donating blood was great, a blood donation could help others, save lives. But I was still too young then, I couldn't donate, I felt particularly sad. The sensation was quite deep that time, I really wanted to do

something, it was first time that I was exposed to how I really wanted to do something, how I could to something, that is, donating blood. Later, the day of my 18th birthday, the first thing I did was to donate blood [she laughs]. (20161101_LT, p. 8)

Lan Tian briefly mentioned that she obtained the support of others as a child. This might have been her way to ground her with to help others in a concrete past situation. But she did not develop that aspect, and I did not pursue this line of inquiry.

> This was a foreshadowing, this is when I was young, I didn't do anything really. After graduation, I later worked as a saleswoman for some time in Hangzhou. … My work was already stable, I wanted to do a few things I wished to do. I was at the office, I had not yet... I found a lot of organizations online, but maybe because I didn't search the right way, I didn't find anything. I found this and that about China volunteers, but there wasn't so much information online seven or eight years ago, so I never found these organizations, then I did it myself. I began to go online to search for information on some poor mountainous areas, there was a lot of this type of information at that time, more authentic than now, now a lot is fake. (20161101_LT, p. 8)
>
> Then I found the phone number of a volunteer called [name] in Qinghai. I called him and asked what was needed there, and he said it was cold there and they needed clothes. Then I packed my own sweaters and jacket, but also those of friends around me, and I sent a box to Yushu in Qinghai. I still remember that list today, that was the first time I donated a dress. Then I searched this kind of organizations online again, and I found a PI organization in Shaanxi. I donated two hundred yuan and I became familiar with a child, this is what I did at the very beginning, at my own personal level. (20161101_LT, pp. 8-9)

I thought at one point that Lan Tian's original urge to help others should be understood at an abstract level, a general sense of compassion that she needed to act, because none of the individuals or groups she wanted to help had been in contact with her. She understood on a cognitive level that they needed support, but she had not been in direct contact with them. Donating blood presented itself to her as an opportunity, and she remembered that event as the first that she associated with her wish. But she pointed to a more concrete reason at another point of the interview, a passage related to her regular visits to rural areas after she became a PIP.

> It's like my sister says, when I go to mountainous areas in Guizhou now, I see a lot of children dressed in rags, with lice in their hair, and I think of myself, because I was like that as a child, I also had lice in my hair, nobody took care of my worn-out clothes, nobody bothered about me not having shoes. This situation as a child… In fact, when I look at these children it's like seeing myself as a child. (p. 2, 21:56)

She identified with these children, recalling her own childhood. Her mother died when Lan Tian was a young child. Her step-mother did not invest emotionally in

Lan Tian and her siblings. Her father paid very little attention to family matters. In Lan Tian's case, as with Shang Fuwen, Ma Zhuoya and a few others, her experience as a rural child probably laid a foundation for her future interest in rural-related areas and the children living in them.

5.2.2.2 Empathy through experience

Empathy does not necessarily stem from situations an individual has lived through during her childhood or at another stage of her life. It can result from a short but profound experience that changes this individual's views. Liu Huimin described herself as a child who did not show obvious signs of empathy. As she remembers, her mother played an essential role in making her understand why it made sense to show empathy to others.

> (…) the deepest thing that my mother left me in terms of education is empathy. Of course, she did not use the word "empathy," this is quite literary. But since I was a child, she told me about putting myself in others' shoes (…). My mother taught me (this) since I was a child. I remember from my childhood that I probably was quite overbearing, I bullied my younger sister. For example, if I wasn't happy, if I did a few bad things when I was very young, as I can recall, my mother would educate me in telling me when you do something like that to your sister or to others, think about what your feelings would be if you switched positions. (20161114_LHM, p. 3)

Learning the value of empathy from one's mother is one thing, applying it to different social groups is another. Working on a PI project when she was employed by a private foundation, Huimin visited dozens of organizations across China, understanding their operations and interviewing PIPs. During one of these visits, she stayed several days in a village where hundreds of handicapped children abandoned by their families have been adopted by a local organization. It changed her outlook on how society should treat handicapped people, especially those suffering from mental handicaps.

> I feel that I gained a lot in this process. I think it is my most profound understanding of life so far. I remember one time I went to a place called Limingzhijia in Hebei. What kind of place is Limingzhijia? All the children there are orphans, orphans with disabilities, especially with cerebral palsy (CP). Because they were all born, and then their parents discovered that they had a problem, they were thrown at the gates of a monastery, (whose occupants) were all Catholics. Since this place adopted the first child 20 years ago, they gradually began adopting many children, because all the children were thrown away there.

> I went there, and I stayed four days. Then for four days, I felt... There was a person there, this person in charge, I talked a lot to her. Before, when I had paid attention to children having autism, those children with autism or CP still had cute faces, they were still very cute. They might have diseases or something like that, but I dared to approach them. But when I was at Limingzhijia in Hebei, I saw many children I was scared of, I was very scared. They were sitting in wheelchairs in a dark room, they could not relieve themselves. The whole situation made me feel that after seeing that, I couldn't face a life like that. I went to talk to the auntie, the person in charge, a person in charge at Limingzhijia. I said, Aunt Wang, I'd like to ask a question. I remember I talked to her about this issue, we talked several times.

Liu Huimin was very forthcoming in this passage. She could have hidden her reactions regarding the children she saw at Limingzhijia. But she chose instead to tell her story with no embellishment, allowing me to gain an understanding of how this visit and her discussions with Aunt Wang changed her perspective.

> I said... I want to know how do you deal with them every day? And then there is something I especially want to know, why do you think they have value? What does the value of living mean to them, who live with such pain? A very cruel thing there is that some of these children may really live for less than two years, they will not live long before their life may disappear. But they are being nursed in that place and receive terminal care, things like that.
>
> I thought at that time... OK, what is the meaning of life, what is their meaning to them, what does this life mean to themselves, what does this life mean to this society. Yes, I felt it was very tough, I was talking to her about this very serious life issue.
>
> I remember very deeply the answer she gave me. She said that she had come in contact with many, no matter whether they were loverly or not. The lives of these children, because she was Catholic, a very pious Catholic... She told me that as long as these lives came to this world, their greatest significance was that they had come to this world, they had done this one trip.
>
> Why? Because, she said (...), the greatest significance of these lives was to this society. Precisely because there are these not-so-beautiful children, not so-strong lives, this society actually begins to have compassion (*aixin*), or to show concern for these children. She told me that if all people in this society were strong, then the development of this society would be in another shape. Then she said that regarding these lives themselves... Of course, this is her understanding, she thought that in coming in this society, even if their existence may be very short, they had experienced birth, aging, sickness, and death. To them, this process may be complete. (20161114_LHM, pp. 24-25)

A teenager she interviewed in that village, born without arms, developed a passion for painting with his mouth at the age of fourteen. Able to paint quite remarkably with three brushes at the same time, he had received lessons from a talented painter. Having no arms, he said, made him focus even more strongly on painting with his mouth, just because he had no other options.

> So, he actually thought that he has an advantage to some extent. I was especially moved while listening to him. I think this was the impact that these lives had on

> my life, it made me think that in fact, these lives are so beautiful. They should be respected and accepted by this society, they should not be looked at in so many strange ways. (20161114_LHM, p. 26)

5.2.2.3 Empathy as an engine for action and change

Lan Tian and Liu Huimin convincingly illustrated how empathy, in a way similar to responsibility, leads to action. In the case of Lan Tian, cognitive, emotional and compassionate empathy stemmed from her personal identification with the children she supported through her work. Liu Huimin's experience at Limingzhijia entails another aspect, one that is reminiscent of Rokeach's third assumption regarding beliefs and values, as indicated in Chapter 2. If a central belief experiences important changes, the whole value system of an individual is affected. Before her stay at Limingzhijia, Liu Huimin held the opinion that some lives were more valuable than others. She revised her assumption due to her experience in that village, resulting in her previous central belief being replaced by a new one. She also mentioned respect, a concept that is often raised by PIPs and that I address in the last value discussed in this section.

5.2.3 Self-esteem

Self-esteem has been studied as a psychological construct since William James distinguished two levels of hierarchy of the self: the "I-self," which corresponds to the processes of knowing, and the "Me-self," the knowledge about the self that results from these processes (James, 1892). George Herbert Mead also distinguished between "I" and "Me". He viewed the former as an active and spontaneous subject, while the latter represents the way we imagine how other individuals see us. In other words, the "Me" side of our self evaluates the actions initiated by our "I" side based on the social responses we receive (Mead & Morris, 1967). PIPs' narratives reflected these two layers of understanding. The term "self-worth" (*ziwo jiazhi*) was literally used by a few PIPs such as Pei Yanni or Guo Zuquan, as is illustrated in the two following sections (5.2.3.1 and 5.2.3.2). Other PIPs, without directly using that term, also referred to self-esteem or self-worth. Their self-esteem had grown as a result of their personal growth,

how they had developed in terms of the skills they learned to master, and also as a person; and how they saw their environment responding to their actions as PIPs. Or, in other terms, the side of their self which is driven by their own agency, and the socialized side of their self that results from their interactions with others, with their community, and with their environment. Mead believed that a personality could not exist without both the “I” and the “Me”. PIPs’ narratives often contained both aspects.

Looking back at his six years of PI engagement, Cao Jin felt “very happy” about the changes he had brought to both his own organization and the field of environmental protection in his province (WeChat communication). Lan Tian talked about her personal “transformation” during her six years of PI work. She felt she had grown as a person in terms of abilities and also of mindset. She evoked the positive energy and trust she felt from people around her, a particularly strong sense of security and the self-confidence that resulted from this overall atmosphere (20161101_LT, p. 15), and the recognition (*kending*) that she had received through her work. She identified happiness and social value as rewards she obtained through her engagement. But self-esteem can also be undermined by a lack of social recognition, or a lack of support from significant others such as relatives, as illustrated by Guo Zuquan’s mother and Zhangli’s father repeatedly attempting to convince their child to look for a less difficult jobs offering better material remunerations.

5.2.3.1 Witnessing the progresses of a child

Pei Yanni spoke in detail about one mentally handicapped child she had accompanied through her organization for three years at the time of the interview. She shone as she spoke, in contrast to other sections of the interview in which she cried as she narrated the story of her son. She clearly drew a deep satisfaction from this case, one that had literally changed the life not only of this child, but of his whole family. The boy could not do anything on his own when his parents brought him to her organization the first time. He could not express any wish or intention, and his parents only expressed one hope: that he would learn to relieve himself independently.

> … the grandmother is a teacher. She had very high expectations. One day, after going through our rehabilitation training, I taught him how to blow, because to speak you must to able to exhaust air, so I taught him how to blow air. He blew, blew, and blew, he blew a lot of windmills, papers, he could do it all. Suddenly I put a building block there, he couldn't move it by blowing. The first time he couldn't move it, the second time, at the same time he was blowing, he pulled it with his hand and the block fell. Then I saw his grandmother especially happy, it seemed she was already crying, extremely moved, she said our (name of the child) can use his head! She said he could use his head, that he knew how to think of a solution. At that time, the two of us really felt like we were doing something incredibly valuable and exciting.
>
> After his grandmother went home, she told his father about this. They had no building blocks, he used the remote control. His child blew on it and pulled it so that it fell. His father then called me, he told me that he never thought his child would be like this one day. "Not only did you solve the problem of (teaching him) how to relieve himself, you could also find a solution for this." He said "before, holding him was just like holding a piece of wood, (…). But now, when he goes to the playground, he takes the children's slide, sits on the rocking horse, he is very willing." He told me "I feel my child is alive." This was really so encouraging for me, I felt like if I could help a family, then I could definitely help a lot of families and, of course, help my own family. This is also something that reflects self-worth. I think I am really important for these parents. I still remember this very vividly.

This was one of the several emotional moments during Yanni's interview. Her face radiated as she told the story of this boy, whose condition had greatly improved thanks to her care. At one level, this example confirmed the value of her work, and thus her self-worth. But it also established the quality of her organization.

> This child has been with me for three years now. Originally, he wasn't even aware of defecating or urinating. Now, he spends half-a-day in the morning at the kindergarten, and half-a-day doing rehabilitation training here. But now if you ask him, (child's name), pee-pee? No pee. Sometimes I say pee-pee, and he goes to the toilet by himself. That was the problem that his parents initially wanted to solve, I solved it. I think I really helped him. Although this kind of action is trivial for a normal child, it was not for him, it really was not. This child has really made great progress now, and I feel that maybe this is the result of this child following my organization and growing with me. Whenever I see him, [it reminds me his evolution] from the stage where we could not pee and poo, up to now where he communicates about anything, he can say what he wants to eat. Our institutions will always go forward, not backward. This is also a motivation. (20161023_PYN, pp. 18-19)

I had witnessed Yanni's pain during the first part of the interview. She repeatedly cried while reminiscing about her son's situation, and all the attempts she had made to improve his condition. I had felt guilty for asking so many questions forcing her to reflect on her life and her PI engagement. The story of that boy represented a stark contrast. His condition was much worse than Yanni's son's,

but the description of his improved situation, and the gratitude of his relatives, provided the best possible sensemaking rationale.

5.2.3.2 Caring for her 'clients'[17]

Guo Zuquan reflected on self-worth when I asked her to explain what she meant with *ziwo jiazhi*, a term she used to describe what she considered the most important aspects in her work. She adopted a matter-of-fact tone to explain her motivations and their relation to self-esteem, or self-worth.

> Well, [she thinks several seconds] maybe speaking of self-worth is a bit too big. Actually, frankly speaking, this is about bringing into play what I'm good at, on the one hand what I'm good at, on the other hand what I'm interested in, and to combine them. In fact, (...) one is my social work expertise, I feel I'm good at it. And from the perspective of the targets I serve, it certainly is mentally handicapped people. If considered from a social work expertise... I'm more on a micro (level), within social work, there are residential community group cases, this is my research. If I want to do research or practice in the future, I would like to focus on this part. There are also internships, (I'd like to) lead interns and supervise them, that part. These might all be (on a) micro (level). (20161106_GZQ, p. 15)

Guo Zuquan had never interacted with mentally handicapped people before her first internship in an organization servicing this social group. That internship only lasted fifteen days, but it radically changed her views about mentally handicapped people. It also led to a job offer in the PIO, an occupation that would become her profession for the next nine years. In the two abstracts below, she describes her thoughts about that first internship, her quick adaptation to her new job following that activity, and how she felt she personally benefited from those experiences.

> Well, I wasn't acclimatized at the beginning because I had never been in contact with handicapped people. But then I went to chat with them. I didn't understand them at first. In fact, when I went to (name of organization) in (first city), the whole staff was very busy, so I often made handiwork with the clients, I participated in their activities, including in the evenings. Sometimes I went to live with them in the same place. Then I discovered that they have a lot of merits. They are very simple, then they also know how to take care of people, if they think you are working hard, they come and pat you a couple of times, pour some water for you. This kind of care particularly touched me, and I thought they are very happy, they live very simply. This may also be related to my character, I think my character inside is also very simple. I thought although the salary was

[17] The term refers to psychology. In that discipline, clients are individuals receiving treatments from a therapist. The Chinese term is *fuwu duixiang*, literally "service targets."

> not high, this work made me very happy, it was very meaningful, and rich. So, I felt a high degree of self-satisfaction and self-worth, including a very strong sense of self-realization. (20161106_GZQ, pp. 11-12)

Self-satisfaction, self-worth, self-realization: Guo Zuquan squarely placed herself at the center of her work, not forgetting to evaluate what she drew from her professional occupation. This often constituted a crucial motivation for PIPs who participated in this research, especially young individuals who had entered the labor market for a relatively short time. They certainly didn't consider their PI involvement as an altruistic endeavor or a selfless act. Rather, they constantly assessed their own feelings of self-worth, their prospects for further growth, and whether their PI occupation would be able to bring them these kinds of benefits. This is how Zuquan answered a question regarding the most essential things she was looking for in her work:

> I feel that the first should be self-worth realization, that I can bring my specialty into play, and this specialty is also my interest. The second is that I hope I can have autonomy and freedom at work, this is very important to me. (20161106_GZQ, p. 14)

5.2.3.3 Construction of the self

Self-esteem, through social interactions, is co-constructed by an individual and his social peers. Exchanges with their clients rank among the most important social interactions that PIPs like Pei Yanni and Guo Zuquan experienced in their lives. As shown in this chapter, their clients, including their family members, ascribed them a sense of value that strengthened their self-esteem, which constituted a confirmation and recognition of the responsibility and empathy displayed through their PI engagement. As a result, these PIPs identified with their social roles, e.g. a teacher-mentor in Yanni's case, and a social work expert in Zuquan's case, thus allowing them to pursue their activities, even in the face of difficulties, as I show in the next chapter.

5.3 Conclusion

Participants highlighted other concepts that could be candidates for a spot in their value system. Joy would be one of them. The two volunteers I first met at the end

of 2012 insisted on the joy that their participation in FL had brought them. Several volunteers of the Guangzhou Chapter of FL spoke about "happy PI" (*kuaile gongyi*), refusing to associate their activities with notions such as sacrifice or bitterness. Lan Tian echoed their rejection, arguing that she, as well as the other members of her organization, did not accept the label of "tragic PI" sometimes conveyed by media reports. Hu Yihua, in addition to advancing responsibility as an essential motivation for his engagement, also suggested "do as you please" (*suixinsuoyu*) as a driving principle.

The notion of "*zuoren*," being an upright person, could be another candidate. Among thirty-seven PIPs, Pei Yanni and Cao Jin were the only individuals who specifically used that word. The term is commonly used in daily language across China to refer to the proper way of behaving in life in general. It does not provide a fixed standard regarding what a proper behavior entails, but it conveys the idea of decency and respect. It could be viewed as a fitting summary of the three values presented in the second part of this chapter, and others that could be identified in future research. This is how Cao Jin used that word when I asked him to reflect on his engagement in 2017, at a time when he had already been working in an environmental PIO for six years. I asked him whether he had any regrets.

> No regrets. I think for six years... First of all, I feel that I have acquired a lot of knowledge in this sector, a lot of principles about how to behave uprightly (*zuoren*), and I also learned a lot of work-related skills. Second, I identify strongly with what I do, I have a sense of mission towards this sector, this fulfils my spirit. Finally, looking back at these six years, I feel that I have brought a lot of changes to (name of his organization), and I have also brought about some changes to the environmental protection work in (name of the province), which has improved a few things. I am also very happy about this. (Personal communication, 2017.08.28)

5.3.1 Instrumental and terminal

Whether the values presented in this chapter can be divided into instrumental and terminal values, as proposed by Rokeach, remains debatable. Weick advanced that "Sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity," arguing that it is doubtful "whether the two are even separable" (Weick, 1995, p. 6). I am inclined to paraphrase him regarding the dualism of instrumental and terminal

values. At first sight, the values of responsibility, empathy and self-esteem lean on the instrumental side of Rokeach's division. Most PIPs I met in the last few years would probably agree that they believe a mode of conduct emphasizing responsibility, empathy and self-esteem, "is personally and socially preferable in all situations with respect to all objects." They would probably also agree, though, that a mode of conduct guided by such values aims to achieve an "end-state of existence [that] is personally and socially worth striving for" (Rokeach, 1972, pp. 160-161).

5.3.2 Values and sensemaking

I suggest that axiological concerns should be incorporated in the overall sensemaking framework, while narrative provides a useful methodology. As "particular types of cognitions that are organized in a consistent pattern, [values] have an evaluative quality, [they] refer to desirable end-states, and imply choice and action" (Wilson, 1979, p 2). Sensemaking, to a large extent, constitutes an evaluative process that assesses past patterns and, if deemed necessary, suggests new anchoring points that orient an individual's understanding of what is right and wrong, what is desirable or not, what should or should not be pursued. Values are fundamental in understanding identity at the individual, group/sectorial and social levels. The study of identity, and how it adapts to changing realities and contexts, lies at the heart of sensemaking.

Stories can bring to light identity- and value-related elements. They constitute one of the methods used by humans to assemble events and facts in a way that makes sense within their specific lifeworld. A story is not just an instrumental means to record and remember facts. It is also an ontological device to make sense of events, link them into a sequence and connect them via a plot (Czarniawska, 1998; Peverelli & Verduyn, 2012), which consists of dominant ideas and recurring themes. Among those, values should be of primary concern to any researcher willing to understand the version of reality or Weltanschauung of the individuals or groups they research. Relying on narrative enables the researcher to study what Berger and Luckmann termed a community of meaning (1995), starting at the individual level, and then exploring the professional or

organizational fields, identifying features shared by a community such as the members of the PI sector in China.

The study of values and the use of narratives are aligned with the principles of the social constructivist approach. Through PIPs' narratives, we do not learn a positivist truth about their identity and the principles on which it is constructed, but we find out how they are engaged in the construction and reconstruction of their identities through an ongoing process of social interactions, and which axiological concerns they refer to and rely on in their pursuit of sense.

In this chapter, I have looked at how some PIPs explain their PI engagement, and I have presented key axiological concerns at the heart of their motivations. In the next chapter I explore how they deal with and make sense of realities that regularly clash with their ideals.

Chapter 6 Ideals vs. Reality: Making Sense of Challenges

In the previous two chapters I focused on the individual dimension of the sensemaking process, showing how PIPs explained their participation, how their engagement shaped their identity, and which values they held to be crucial to their lifeworld. But the realities PIPs experience often pose acute challenges that clash with their views and their values. These realities encompass different levels – individual, sectorial and social – which are highly interrelated. Isolating each for analytical convenience would be detrimental to a holistic comprehension of how PI engagement constitutes a sensemaking process, especially in the face of challenges.

In the first section of this chapter, I illustrate the individual, sectorial and social dimensions of PI engagement through two examples. In the second part, I argue that a major reason behind the challenges encountered by PIPs lies in the lack of legitimation of PI in all its forms: as a construct, an occupation and a sector. I then present some of the challenges identified by PIPs, such as the difficulty of explaining their work to other social actors, facing the reactions of their significant others or coming to terms with low incomes. In the last section, I analyze how they cope with and make sense of these situations.

6.1 Individual, sectorial and social dimensions of PI engagement

Cao Jin and Guo Zuquan, mentioned in the previous chapter, provide good illustrations of the three dimensions of PIPs' engagement.

6.1.1 Example 1: environmental protection

The WeChat exchange with Cao Jin that I quoted in the previous chapter exemplifies the three levels of realities that can be identified in PIPs' engagement. At the personal level, he believed he had become a better person, using the term *"zuoren"* which I have suggested as a possible candidate in PIPs' value system. At the sectorial level, he felt imbued with a sense of "mission"

regarding the development of his profession (*hangye*), even using the term "spirit" to describe how his mission fulfilled him. At the social level, he could detect some improvements in the way his province dealt with environmental protection. In June 2018, he was still working at the same organization with the same determination.

6.1.2 Example 2: supporting mentally handicapped people

While she didn't use the word "mission" like Cao Jin, the personal, group and social level of identification could also be found in Guo Zuquan's narrative. She enjoyed the freedom she was granted in her work, learning different skills and growing as an individual. She fully endorsed the model of the organization where she worked for a little less than a decade. Her personal involvement in spreading that organization's model to similar, younger organizations imbued her with a sense of purpose – not exactly a mission but coming relatively close. She felt that she partook in the slow and gradual evolution that led to improving the situation of mentally handicapped people and their families in China.

> (...) (name of the organization) has operated for more twenty years, I very much endorse that service model, (...), (the organization) is located in residential quarters where people live an ordinary life, in ordinary two- or three-bedroom apartments, you can't see from the outside that it is an institution for disabled persons. I'm very much in agreement with this idea. We're now also transmitting this concept to other institutions, so that the life quality of more clients can be improved.
> So, I think this is very meaningful and valuable. And I also saw these changes, because I often went on business trips during the last two years there. I travelled a lot. I went to different places across the country, small cities, I went to see their institutions to do some on-site coaching and not only one time. You could see some progress and change every time. (20161106_GZQ, p. 18)

Guo Zuquan left this organization to join a university where she taught social work, her major in university nine years ago. The person she became during her nine years serving mentally handicapped people used the same values in her new occupation, putting her new "clients" first, finding motivation and drive in their needs, as eager to contribute to social work as she had been as a PIP supporting disabled individuals. Her students were her new "clients" and her main reason for not leaving her new job during the first year, a period during which she thought nostalgically about her previous occupation.

> (…) at school the biggest motivation probably comes from the students, that is, the people I serve have changed now, they've become students. They study this specialty (social work) and my students may not be the same kind as ordinary undergraduate students. They also have a lot of problems, their scores are relatively low, some individuals are orphans or ethnic minority students. (20161106_GZQ, p. 22)

Comparing herself to other teachers, she saw clear differences that were derived from her PI engagement and the values she had nurtured through that experience. These values included empathy and a sense of responsibility toward the social group she supported.

> I think I am different than other teachers in some areas, I can sense a few things when I work. Maybe because I have spent so much time at (name of her previous organization), I still use the same values with the students, I feel very equal to them, I also regard as important some of their qualities, I help them, how to say… I build their confidence? I don't like to speak as if I were on top and have them listen as if they were below, I hope they can express their qualities, (I want) to let them discuss, participate, to give them opportunities. I think this is where lies the main motivation in my current work, I think I still feel some sense of success. Although it is not as strong as before, but there is some. (20161106_GZQ, p. 22-23)

Her objective was to help students' personal growth, as she had worked on her clients' development in her previous occupation. This objective was primarily for the students' own good, but also for the profession she had learned to appreciate, social work. Five months after the interview, she confirmed during a WeChat exchange the importance of the same principles. As a teacher, her goals were "to treat students more equitably and to allow them more participation, self-determination, mutual assistance and interaction." My interpretation was that Zuquan had not left the PI sector and that she carried along the same sense of purpose as a social work teacher that she had brought forward as a PIP. She still worked in the wider sphere of public interest. I develop this argument in the next chapter.

6.1.3 Representative of other PIPs

The two examples cited above illustrate the individual, sectorial and social dimensions of PI engagement. Cao Jin and Guo Zuquan stand as examples for what several PIPs I met in the course of this research told me during interviews and other exchanges. They felt that they had grown as individuals. They had not only learned skills but had become "better persons." They were committed to

their organizations and to the causes they represented: environmental protection and support of mentally handicapped people. They hoped to make social contributions to these causes, improving the way environmental protection worked at the provincial level and improving the social treatment of mentally handicapped people.

Their dedication to achieving these objectives often met stern challenges that put their values and ideals into question. In the next two sections of this chapter, I concentrate on these challenges and on how PIPs make sense of these difficulties.

6.2 Lacking legitimation

This chapter relies on the hypothesis that the sources of the challenges encountered by PIPs can all be traced to the paramount issue of the lack of legitimation of PI in China as a sector, an occupation and as a construct. I presented the concept of legitimation in Chapter 2, as introduced by Berger & Luckmann:

> Legitimation "explains" the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings. Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives. It is important to understand that legitimation has a cognitive as well as a normative element. In other words, legitimation is not just a matter of "values." It always implies knowledge as well. (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 93)

As the following pages illustrate, PIPs have to cope with situations in which they face social actors who do not associate objectivated meanings with the concept of PI, or who associate only oversimplified meanings. Cognitive validity cannot be attributed to a concept that has no objectivated signification. When knowledge is lacking there is little room for legitimation to develop.

In the following pages, I test that hypothesis against PIPs' narratives. In accordance with the social constructivist approach, my point is not to unveil in a positivist way the "true" reasons behind this lack of legitimation, but to illustrate how PIPs' narratives provide solid materials to support this hypothesis. I start with stories of confusion and puzzlement that occur when PIPs find themselves in situations that require them to explain their professional occupation to other persons.

6.2.1 Explaining PI

One of the first questions faced by anyone meeting someone new is about his or her occupation. PIPs are no exceptions. Several practitioners told me stories of such situations in which they found themselves at pains to explain their work, sometimes even creating versions that avoided going into specific details likely to provoke confusion or maybe even opposition. As can be seen from some of the examples below, confusion may start from PIPs' own lack of understanding.

6.2.1.1 Strategy 1: the functionalist argument

Chen Rongrong entered the PI sector because she needed a job in Beijing, where her boyfriend lived and worked. She admitted that she understood little about PI when she started in that sector, apart from co-organizing a forum for the magazine where she had worked as a reporter after graduating university with a degree in journalism.

> At that time, I thought... I didn't think it was a career, I didn't think either that it was a job. I thought it might be a temporary thing for me in Beijing, it was like being a volunteer. It was [she hesitates] ... Anyway, I didn't see it as something very formal. (20160326_CRR, p. 30)

Like most people living and working in another place than where they grew up, Chen Rongrong went back home for Chinese New Year, where she had the opportunity to get together with her childhood schoolmates. Asked about her occupation, she faced the double challenge of having to explain and coping with the reactions. Reactions ranged from understanding to total puzzlement, depending on the group of individuals she was talking to.

> It's very hard (to explain). Every time it comes to this, we end up wrangling. [They say that] they take out some money and I spend it, your money is not regular (*zhenggui*), it's like Guo Meimei, etc. Their understanding of PI stopped at the Guo Meimei incident. My university classmates can understand, as well as my primary school classmates. Those who have the most difficulties to understand are my junior and senior high school classmates. (20160326_CRR, p. 27)

She tried to adopt different strategies to cope with various reactions, drawing comparisons that could be understood by some of her schoolmates who had gone through experiences Rongrong could refer to.

> I take them (my schoolmates) as examples. Some of them work in large foreign companies. I tell them that every year, their foreign companies must organize PI activities. Why do they do it? Once a company becomes bigger, it gives back to

> the people what it has obtained from them (*qu zhi yu min, yong zhi yu min*), this company bears a part of social responsibility, that's how I explain to them. The activity you organize every year, giving gifts to children in mountainous areas, isn't that PI? Then, again, I talk about PI. Companies put economic benefits first. Managing a company well and maximizing economic benefits is also doing PI. Of course, they do not agree with this [she laughs], so it's quite hard. Some of them, if they have CSR in their company, then it's a bit easier. Some of them work in private companies, then it's quite difficult to explain. (20160326_CRR, p. 27)

This reference to private companies is one I could not relate to at the time of the interview. Having lived in Zhejiang most of the time since I came to that province for fieldwork in March 2016, I had plenty of opportunities to meet private entrepreneurs who had founded their own companies and grown them into successful SMEs. I regularly found myself in Rongrong's situation, trying to explain the purpose of my research. In many cases, the reactions varied between polite disinterest to apparent bafflement, interlocutors wondering about what would motivate someone to work as a PIP instead of looking for a "proper" occupation.

> Others tell me that I am hard-pressed to support myself, but I still help others. I answer that after all, someone has got to do this thing. There are also some who say that that donations are not well supervised and it's not clear where it ends up being used. I tell them that if nobody manages these donations, if the money only goes from one account to another, it can never be turned in a child's lunch. If people are in charge of this, it inevitably generates costs. People have to eat, drink and live, they need a salary, that is a reasonable cost. That's how I explain (my work) to them. (20160326_CRR, p. 27)
> It's feeble [she laughs], futile. In the end, we don't reach any conclusion. It depends on what kind of person [I'm talking to]. (...) If I talk to a taxi driver, I'll use the same arguments as with my classmates. The taxi driver says that I'm very compassionate, but it's nothing more than a compliment. After the compliment, you can still feel that he doesn't understand. (...) They wonder why someone would think of helping others... But I tell them the same thing, it's just a job, someone needs to manage that money [i.e. donations] so that it can be used. (20160326_CRR, p. 28)

In the end, her only recourse was to argue that her work needed to be done, like a social function that could not be left unattended. Considering the lukewarm reactions that she received, this was probably one of the smartest strategies she could adopt in the face of deligitimation. An individual can only go so far as suggesting a narrative, but one narrative can hardly result in legitimation, unless adopted and supported by most social actors, starting with state institutions. The "it-needs-to-be-done" argument thus looked like a practical solution that Rongrong could fall back on, justifying to unresponsive audiences both her occupation and PI as a construct. Dissatisfied by her own argument and the

reactions it generated, she expressed discouragement and a certain degree of irritation.

6.2.1.2 Strategy 2: "huyou" instead of debate

Bei Peng, like Chen Rongrong, did not plan to work in the PI sector, nor did he have any knowledge of this area before working as an accountant for a state foundation associated to FL. Like Rongrong, he first had to obtain an understanding of the PI sector before he found himself in a situation where he had to explain his job to relatives and friends. His description of how he dealt with this issue the first time he went back home for Spring Festival drew a big smile on my face.

> (...) I was asked this question when I went home for Spring Festival in 2012. What are you doing? I said that I work at the China Social Welfare Foundation. First of all, I used this name to fool other people: 'China,' in the Chinese society. Any company that includes the characters 'China' is quite a big enterprise. Then they asked what are you concretely doing? I said I'm doing PI there. You mean 'arts and crafts,' that *gongyi*? I said no, something like charity, people donate money to us, and then we spend the money on the people who need it. That's the way I explained at the time. (20160422_BP, p. 8)

The word that came to my mind when Bei Peng told this story was "*huyou*," which can be approximately translated as "bamboozling" or "hoodwinking." He first placated his relatives through the use of the word "China," which elicited a certain respect. He was right to identify that word with a sense of solemnity. No institution in China would be authorized to use the country's name without official approval. This was apparently sufficient not to draw further questions. Bei Peng was not interested in explaining his work as Chen Rongrong had attempted with her childhood classmates. Instead, he found an ironic way around a problem that many PIPs face in their daily lives. Another example is Jin Min, who remembered one particular case during the interview.

6.2.1.3 Strategy 3: fine-tuning one's identity

Jin Min worked in a foundation that supported the development of the PI sector. The manager of a small team, she was responsible for a child welfare project. Below is a concrete example of an innocuous situation where she felt at a loss

about how to explain her work to an audience of outsiders without any understanding of PI.

> As you just asked this question [about my understanding of PI], I was thinking about people who don't understand this (PI) sector at all, not insiders. With insiders, probably one sentence and you understand I'm working on a child welfare project, maybe we all know, our representation will not be too off-target. But for people not doing the same, I assume that they simply have no clue at all. I remember one time I went to the hospital, I first had to create a record, the staff had to record my work unit, I said it's called (name of her PI-related institute), she (misunderstood) China Public Interest for arts and crafts (*gongyi*), it's like handicraft, they're homophonous, that's the word she wrote...

Like in Bei Peng's case, the word *gongyi* was misunderstood as standing for arts and crafts, not public interest. I can vouch for the veracity of this situation, as I faced it myself numerous times.

> They associated this with that word. I said no, no, it is that *gongyi* (PI), I had to explain a long time. And to tell the truth, I didn't know how to explain, I didn't know how to explain it in a simple way. Since then, if someone asks me again, I generally say that I do research in the field of child welfare. Because nobody understands either what it is to do a project, what is a project about children, the word project is used in many situations. Everybody usually understands welfare but might find PI strange, they might say it's the word handicraft. So, I generally say child welfare research, or I say I'm in a research institute under (name of the) University. They say you are a teacher? I say no, I'm a researcher and I don't explain more, because usually the explanation is not understood. I don't know if my method is right or wrong, maybe I should take this opportunity to promote (PI) [she laughs], but I haven't done so indeed.

Instead of standing firm on her position and venturing into a long-winded explanation, Jin Min decided to find the next best option that would not be too far off the mark while being easier to understand for the hospital staff. It worked, in a way, putting an end to an embarrassing situation. But it only constituted a second-best option that left her perplexed and uncomfortable.

> My mood was certainly not calm in that moment, there was no pride either. To be honest, it was a bit embarrassing, because the staff looked very embarrassed after I explained, they were absolutely clueless about how to respond. After I said I worked in PI or on children's PI projects, I don't know if they did not react because they didn't understand this sector, or whether they felt that it's different than other sectors. Maybe they expected me to work for a bank, or in human resources, I thought the result was the same as if I had said I'm making movies [she laughs], yes, the effect was the same, similar. Because they thought that was not so much a mainstream sector. So, they [other people in similar situations] usually freeze, they don't know how to keep asking, then I add one sentence, I do research on child welfare, in a school, something like that. I am embarrassed for the others, very embarrassed, I don't know what to say. (20161111_JM, p. 34)

This identity fine-tuning was not an exceptional case. Chen Rongrong, after four years of PI engagement, admitted that she was still struggling to explain her work

to people with little knowledge of the PI sector. Like Jin Min, she preferred to avoid discussions regarding her work, sometimes even hiding the fact that she was a PIP and presenting another identity to her interlocutors. "In fact, we PIPs are very reluctant to admit that we are PIPs. I am more willing to feel that I am a media person" (20160326_CRR, p. 25). Rongrong studied journalism. Her first work was as a magazine reporter. One of the factors that led her to enter FL's team was the job description, which emphasized the importance of journalistic skills. But the nature of her work quickly evolved. In the end, she preferred to alter her identity to avoid the embarrassment of an inconclusive discussion and the need to confront a lack of understanding, and, ultimately, of legitimation.

6.2.1.4 Legitimation: an ongoing process

According to Lan Tian, the situation was evolving. The cases narrated by Rongrong, Bei Peng and Jin Min were regular occurrences, but they were gradually replaced by more positive reactions. Lan Tian described the range of responses she experienced when explaining her work. Reactions displaying cynicism that denied recognition and legitimation of PI work constituted one part of the story. Lan Tian thought these skeptical-cynical responses had decreased in the course of her six-year PI career at the time.

> In fact, human nature is good, I have always believed this sentence. Most people have a natural affinity for PI, for charity (*cishan*), when they hear you do PI, they first have a strong sense of trust and identity towards you, that's for most people. They will ask you with interest what you do, which people do you help, this is very interesting, can I also do it? Or they say you are great, the things you do are really good things! I think… How to say it? At least half of the people react that way, divided into several types. Half of the people might think what you do is a good thing, they're interested. Among the other half, a part is indifferent, what is this thing? I'm not interested. Then there is a small part, as I just said, that are extreme cases. Donate money! I have no money, donate some to me, this is a small part of rather extreme cases. Around me, the reactions I encounter during my work are basically these three types of people. (20161101_LT, p. 13)

Lan Tian found reasons for optimism in human nature. She thought that there existed an innate tendency in human beings to feel attracted to the ideals conveyed by PI. Her narrative rested on the belief that even if PI had started from a low point (cf. Wang Zhenyao in Chapter 1) its legitimation process should naturally progress with time. It also relied on her practical experience of improved responses in the six years she had been a PIP. Her narrative put in

perspective all the issues she had encountered in her work. It also validated her choice to become a PIP.

It is no coincidence that among the four cases presented in this section the only practitioner who did not attempt to provide an earnest explanation is the only one who rejected PI as a professional career. His three-year stint in the sector had started by chance, not by choice. He developed an admiration for some of the individuals he worked with, but that esteem turned into disenchantment. I present this "negative" case, in the sense given by Lincoln & Guba (2013), in the "misrepresentation" section of this chapter. Before presenting this negative case, I present two other aspects that illustrate the lack of legitimation of the PI sector and how PIPs cope with these challenges. One is the difficulty for some PIPs of obtaining the support of their significant others. The other lies in the material challenges that most PIPs encounter in their work.

6.2.2 Gaining support of significant others

No matter how much PIPs are attached to their work and what they associate with it, reconciling personal values and ideas with those of significant others such as family members can be challenging. Guo Zuquan and Zhang Li exemplify this situation, which concerns a substantial number the PIPs I encountered.

6.2.2.1 "Not so honorable"

Guo Zuguan's family members, especially her mother, never overtly opposed her career choice, but they found ways to put pressure on her. Lack of support is not always expressed in direct terms, but Zuquan had no doubts about her mother's reservations.

> I originally worked at... Didn't I just change my job this year? But previously I worked at (name of the organization) all along. My mom wasn't particularly supportive, but she didn't particularly object either (...). Including my faith in Christianity now, my mother was not particularly supportive either [she laughs]. She says the more I believe, the more... Maybe she feels I'm too kind... Not good enough towards myself. However, although she had this idea, I think my mother, from her heart, she is actually kind-hearted. But maybe this matter has had a certain influence on her. (20161106_GZQ, p.4)

Zuquan justified her mother's lack of support in pointing to her mother's concern for Zuquan's wellbeing. This concern was not simply dismissed. Her mother almost succeeded in changing Zuquan's career choice.

> …after three years at (name of organization) I was in a dilemma, I struggled. I also considered whether I should change my job because of what my mother told me. But every time I struggled a long time, I decided to stay. The reason was not because I could not find a job, I believed I could find a better job, enter a foundation, or go to some companies, I'm very confident in my abilities. But I think I made the conscious decision to stay. On the one hand, after three years, I felt I was emotionally very attached to those clients, although it was hard and tiring, and the salary low, but I still liked this work. I thought the things I had learned could also be used there, and that it was also quite... it was also a very good platform (*pingtai*), I had been given a lot of space to develop. So, I was unwilling (to leave), and after hesitating I was still reluctant, and I chose to persevere. (20161106_GZQ, p. 12)

A revealing aspect of Zuquan's narrative was the fact that she "could find a better job," thus tacitly recognizing the validity of her mother's argument. In her next abstract she admitted her less-than-ideal working conditions. As we saw in the previous section (see 6.1.2), she resolved the tension created by her mother's mild but persistent disapproval in referring to the social group she supported.

> In fact, when I first started, they (my family) didn't know much about this work. Later, my mother came to (name of the city) once, that was after I had already been working three years, she came with my sister to have some fun at the time of National Day, she came to my unit (*danwei*). At that time, our unit was in the vicinity of the (famous historical spot), in a courtyard. My mother came to have a look, and she stayed in my place, she thought the conditions were really bad, [she corrects herself], the conditions were not great, then she felt... Anyway… In fact, they never agreed that I continued to work there, they always wanted me to change jobs, for example to find one with good conditions, a better salary. Every time I went back home they would nag at me, and they especially hoped that I would go back home, so that we could all take care of each other. Anyway, they talked and talked, all along. As for me, I always persevered, always persevered [she laughs]. (20161106_GZQ, p. 9)

Although she persisted, and even defended the position of her family members, saying that she understood why her mother tried to convince her to give up her work, Zuquan displayed a certain degree of weariness. It was apparent during the interview that these long-lasting efforts at changing her mind had taken their toll. Even if she was able to find some positive points regarding her mother's appraisal of her work, she raised another aspect that reflected a social lack of legitimation for PI engagement.

> ... I think I also understand my family, their starting point is to hope I have a better life, I especially understand why they want me to change jobs, why they want me to go home. But in fact, they are not particularly strongly opposed. Even

> if they were not strongly in favor, but later, although salaries are low at (name of the organization she worked in), but there are many opportunities, for example I went to Hong Kong, and then later abroad, there are many such opportunities to go out and learn. Then I tell them all, so my mom sometimes tells her neighbors, and also uncles and aunts. I think she ... Actually, from another perspective, my mother sometimes feels a kind of feeling like pride. What they are not satisfied about is just the salary, maybe it's mainly about the salary, including that I am together with these mentally handicapped people the whole day. There is another very important reason, I think in my mother's traditional thinking, she has still a bit of… Chinese people and the respectable character of a work… They might think this is not a very honorable work, that's my feeling. There is also a reason at that level. (20161106_GZQ, p. 9)
> *Q: In which respect is it not honorable?*
> The targets of my service, the group of people I work with, they (my relatives) may feel they are not very respectable. My mother might think that… My older sisters are okay, but my mother may have this feeling. For example, if a friend asked where her daughter works, she might feel awkward about answering, something like that. (20161106_GZQ, p. 9)

Zuquan was not completely affirmative when raising this point, but I attributed her caution to the way she had described her mother's continued opposition to her career choice. During all our exchanges, she always refrained from criticizing her mother or from condemning her disapproval. Most importantly, she identified a key factor explaining her mother's attitude, that she attributed to a wider social reality: the perception that working with mentally handicapped people might not be valuable. Liu Huimin doubted the usefulness of providing care to severely mentally handicapped people (see Chapter 5), Zuquan's mother questioned her daughter's work in support of this group.

6.2.2.2 *"Not completely convinced"*

Zhang Li's parents did not approve of his decision to engage in a PI career. A gap separated them that could not be bridged by his explanations. Still a student at the time, he had become involved in raising awareness about hemophilia after discovering the plight of a hemophiliac teenager in a TV program. He could not foresee that this would lead to choosing PI as a career. He received an offer from an organization to work full-time as a PIP specializing in providing support to hemophiliac children and their families. He decided to accept the offer, which required moving far away from home and his parents.

> But uh, regarding this question, there was no way we could sit in agreement. Because I could not rely on words to let them sense my opinions about what I saw, experienced and learned that year. In particular, the more I argued with my

> parents or was in the process of communicating, the more I recalled the scene of that night when Zhang Yuanzhi [the teenager in the program, whom he befriended and helped] was holding his arm and could not sleep; the more I recalled Zhang Yuanzhi and my first feeling when I watched that video in the cafeteria, and why on earth did I have the impulse to want to rush back to the dormitory to check information; the more I recalled when I went with his father to the social security administration, then to the health insurance administration, and how his father was happy after the formalities were done and he called me and said: "thank you very much, Little Liu, our child had no health insurance for more than ten years, and now finally he's got it!" In the process of arguing with my parents, the more we argued the more I felt how this matter was important to me [he laughs]. Anyway, this matter got the upper hand. So, finally this was put to rest, I did not argue with them anymore, I was already prepared to carry a bag and come to [name of city]. (20161122_ZL, pp. 49-50)

The disagreement with his parents was more openly conflictual than in Guo Zuquan's case, but the chief motivation behind his decision was similar. Thinking of Zhang Yuanzhi, who had become a close friend and whose situation he had witnessed firsthand during his student years, he felt impelled to take a step his parents were not ready to contemplate. The narrative of his PI involvement, as in Zuquan's case, reflected the emotional strain of going against the opinion of his closest friends and family members, while sensing a compelling moral argument for taking this step. As Zhang Li's involvement continued, he learned to appease his parents' misgivings, especially his father's.

> About my father's current position..., every year when I go back, he still tries to persuade me to come back. Of course, now he knows that we are doing better every year, and every year, when I go back... I think it was from the third year that I got smarter, I would take some stuff from our organization and bring them back, I would report to my father and tell him what kind of things we had done that year. Look at this father, we helped the child on this magazine's cover, I saved that child [he laughs], right. In fact, because my father is old, he's quite understanding regarding these things, he knows from his heart that his son is doing a good thing. The only point he is struggling with may be whether he feels his son has a dependable and stable work. His son is spending time and energy on others, in the end, when you're old, who will take care of you? Can your job help you to have a foothold in society, to solve your pension problem? He is not against me doing PI. He knows that I am doing a good thing, so actually these years he has gradually found himself in the middle of contradictions, but it's already been six years ... yes, six years. … I cannot say that I have completely convinced my father. He still recommends me a job every year, but his attitude is not as unyielding as in previous years. (20161122_ZL, p. 62)

Zhang Li and Zuquan both found reasonable arguments to justify their parents' worries. Both had to cope with situations in which they were never granted full recognition and acceptance of their choices, regardless of the benefits their work brought to the groups they supported. No motivations advanced by their children

could make up for a choice that lacked social legitimation. As a result, two plots coincided in their narratives. One plot was of familial tensions due to a lack of comprehension regarding their children's choices, with repeated attempts to change their decisions and put an end to what their parents perceived as a bad story. The other plot was of perseverance, resisting family suggestions and good intentions. The moral of this double plot is that PI engagement as a life choice made enough sense to Zuquan and Zhang Li that even under repeated trials and tensions it remained their preferred version of reality.

6.2.3 Lacking legitimation: further symptoms

Most of the participants provided further indications of lacking legitimation. Yue Fei, like numerous other participants, mentioned the issue of his low incomes, a practical problem that constituted the main question mark over his long-term PI involvement. Lan Tian, like Chen Rongrong, lamented the fact that it was difficult to hire talented people. Rongrong regretted that most PIPs had little knowledge about PI, which made it difficult to engage in productive critical thinking that might resolve some of the organization's problems. While she welcomed the new charity law, she recognized the burgeoning state of the sector. Guo Zuquan told me about her experience of social work in China, first as a student then as a teacher, which I thought illustrated perfectly how PI in general was mostly neglected by the state. I present these signs of lacking legitimation in the next section. The section is organized in the three dimensions introduced at the beginning of this chapter, i.e. individual, sectorial and social. This includes insisting, again, that the three levels are intertwined.

6.2.3.1 Symptom 1: low remuneration

I always asked participants what were the biggest challenges they had to cope with as PIPs. The responses I received often brought up two intricately related issues. The first, at the individual level, concerned the material remunerations of being a professional PIP. The second, a direct consequence of the first, regarded the difficulty of attracting talent and retaining staff in the PI sector.

Yue Fei could be described as a satisfied PIP. He had already planned his professional future, which he clearly saw in the PI sector. There remained one element of uncertainty that could change the situation: his incomes.

> I do not for the time being (consider leaving the PI sector). In fact, I'm discussing this with my wife these days. The two of us are still quite satisfied with our works, both in terms of our situation or the significance of being involved in this sector, we think it is fine. But living in (name of city) does have very real problems, the cost of living. That includes the high pressure of living expenses. In fact, it's mainly about housing, mainly about housing. Apart from that I think it's almost the same everywhere in the country. But if we want to live (here) long-term, housing is related to a child's future schooling, household registration, this series of problems, the pressure is really high. The two of us are not saying that we are certainly going to stay here, (even if) I may be a bit firmer because I already have plans for my future that are not away from here, they're all here. That includes my wish to study as a graduate student at (name of) University and so to stay in (name of city). (20161106_YF, p. 21)

Yue Fei did not face pressure from his family or wife. He had obtained his PI work through the advice of a very supportive family member. His wife, Guo Zuquan, had worked nine years in a PIO. But Yue Fei recognized that only a minority of individuals joining the PI sector could accept such a low remuneration and opt for a PI career.

> Uh, I think I held out through this period: the salary is quite low at the beginning, and you need to use your enthusiasm in other areas to learn about this sector, because I believe it is quite new for a lot of fresh graduates or people who have just started to work. It requires great enthusiasm to understand and [he hesitates] to throw yourself in (*toushen*), to figure out what it really is, how to do it reasonably, to have a concept about it, an assessment. And I think that for people who live in some second-tier cities, or some places where economic pressure is relatively lower, this is not a problem for them, because the cost of living are not high, and this is their place, they have a home, then it's just a job. (20161106_YF, p. 23)

Satisfaction with one's work and appreciation of its meaningfulness could not constitute the only considerations in an individual's choice. Yue Fei's circumstances were mitigated by the support he received from his family members, starting with his wife. Even if he still felt uncertain about future choices, he was in a relatively fortunate situation. I often heard complaints from PIPs that evoked the term *suku*, to complain, or vent one's grievances.
Cheng Feifei, a very committed volunteer who seriously considered entering the PI sector upon graduation, recognized that material considerations had played a role.

> My current monthly salary is 6,000 yuan after tax, yearly income is about 70,000-80,000. In a city like Guangzhou, this income is not high, but it is not low either.

> Among my schoolmates, this salary belongs to the mid-upper level. But in PIOs, the monthly salary for project specialists who just graduated is about 4,000-5,000, and some don't have social security. And my current company has given me some shares, which I think is more in line with my expectations. I would not get this salary in a PIO. It gives me a decent life and I can imagine there is space for development. This, for a young person, is more attractive. (WeChat and email exchanges, 8 May 2017)

Feifei was honest about the importance she attached to receiving a decent income. She mentioned her wish to remain financially independent. In 2018, she started an experiment that was only possible through the support of her new employer and Deng Fei's Union. Her remuneration was guaranteed by her new employer, a private corporation, while she worked full-time at the Union. Her one-year commitment was enabled only through that original agreement.

In many cases, PIPs such as Lan Tian and Lin Meijiao accepted their low incomes. They knew very well that by common social standards they earned little money. The issue did not lie in the absolute level of their incomes, but in the social implications of their low earnings.

> … to be very frank, because you work in the public interest sector, to be honest, material requirements or standard are not going to be so high. I think I do not care about that so much. But when you face children and parents, you may have a sense of guilt, you feel you should strive to give them a better life, take care of them. There is a conflict and contradiction here. (20161129_LMJ, p. 48)

This contradiction concerned a lot of PIPs. It also had a wide effect on the whole sector.

6.2.3.2 Symptom 2: shortage of talents

Lan Tian neatly summarized the consequences of generally low incomes in the PI sector, with most PIOs struggling to offer a remuneration reaching the level of the local average salary. Low remuneration created a situation that made it almost impossible to attract talent and retain staff.

> This is a vicious circle, as we say here it's a vicious circle. If wages are low, you can't attract talents. If you can't attract talents, you can only recruit college graduates or people who might not have strong abilities. After you've hired them, they can't do great things for you, they can't generate great value, then your organization can only grow relatively slowly, you can't offer higher salaries, then you can't recruit talents, and so you've entered a vicious circle [she chuckles]. The biggest difficulty in the past few years is people. We especially hope, we're dying for people to join us, people like us, who are passionate about this work, who love it, who have strong abilities, and very willing to learn. This is the

> biggest problem. (20161101_LT, p. 25)

Lan Tian ranked the issue of hiring and retaining talent as her biggest challenge. Considering that this is also a headache for most of the private entrepreneurs and businesspersons I have met in China over the years, it is even less surprising to hear PIPs deplore the situation. The consequences reverberate throughout the whole sector, as Chen Rongrong pointed out.

> Why is the financial industry thriving? It's because everyone can make good, high income, then more ideas, more models, more policies will come out. Now, when grass-roots people meet, what do we talk about? (i.e. low salaries) Do you think it is normal? How many of those who speak in the name of the PI sector are involved in frontline work? You see, let me be direct, people like Deng Fei, Xu Yongguang, like them, they just have other sources of income to support them, so they can calmly jump out of this sector and think about it. Those who really work on the frontline do not have such opportunities and conditions to ponder these things. [She pauses a few seconds] I don't know if [the PI sector] has experienced such a stage in foreign countries. (20160326_CRR, p. 25)

Rongrong lowered her voice when speaking about PI celebrities who did not have to deal with the problems of frontline work. She wasn't so much angry as frustrated by this state of affairs, which had direct consequences on the overall vitality of the PI sector.

6.2.3.3 Symptom 3: shortage of ideas and knowledge

This is how Rongrong described what happens when PIPs meet together:

> When PIPs talk together they mostly complain (*suku*). I think this sector is very negative and lifeless. If we can all together solve our worries about basic necessities of life, then there is space for thoughts and more creative thinking. That would be virtuous for this sector. (20160326_CRR, p. 25)

She did not enjoy that situation. She also deplored the fact that most PIPs had no understanding of the theoretical foundations of PI. She had been in that situation, as had been other individuals such as Bei Peng and Lan Yaoli.

> In fact, this is also a very big issue currently in the PI sector. From all the people who are PIPs, few come from the social work specialty, there is no theoretical knowledge, it all starts from practice. However, if practice is not supported by theory, it's quite dangerous, it can easily go wrong. So, this is... [she hesitates] There are very few trainings in this area. If there are any, they are also from within the sector, I think I can also go and speak in those trainings, there is no urgent need [for this kind of trainings]. (20160326_CRR, p. 28)

The lack of training was an example she used to illustrate the overall shortage of theoretical knowledge she saw prevailing in the sector. Existing theoretical

knowledge was offered by people operating within the sector. She hinted that the quality of the training did not reach a level that made attendance so essential. In other words, she didn't think the pressing issues she had identified were being properly addressed.

Rongrong's judgement was confirmed by other PIPs. Lan Yaoli's personal experience provided an illustration. She admitted that, like Rongrong, she had entered the sector without any conception of PI. After becoming a professional PIP it took her three months to come to terms with her prior representation of what a PIP should be.

> Because I thought I should not get a salary, what could justify a salary? I thought that people would say it's not good when someone like me gets paid, they would be suspicious. Because at that time, I did not understand the concept that PIPs need to survive. I didn't apply for any reimbursement in the first three months, that meant that I didn't get a penny for six months. Plus, when I volunteered, I paid for myself. (20160521_LYL, p. 22)

Many of the PIPs I met during my research were similar to Lan Yaoli. Like her, they entered the sector with either no knowledge and/or notions akin to stereotypes. This situation might not be so surprising considering the caution of party-state institutions and local officials towards PIOs and their practitioners. It is even less surprising if one considers the situation of social work as described by Guo Zuquan.

6.2.3.4 Symptom 4: social work

The current lack of legitimation of working in the PI sector concerns PIOs as well as social work. There are some major differences between PI and social work. Social workers are employed by the government, not by private non-enterprise units or private foundations. All priorities and work objectives are set by the government.

The story narrated by Guo Zuquan sheds some light on the PI sector and its low appeal as a career. I was stunned by her description of how she came to study social work following the *gaokao*. Among the 70 students who started to study this specialty in her university cohort, only one had pro-actively opted for that major. The presence of all the others, including Zuquan, was due only to their insufficient performance on the *gaokao*. Upon graduation, most other students

studied further and changed their major or went back to their hometowns to look for other opportunities, including civil service. Zuquan did not successfully pass the exam leading to graduate studies, which is why she started to work.

Their indifference toward social work didn't stem only from the students. The university did not seem motivated to create an environment conducive to generating interest in the field. None of the teachers had ever worked as a social worker, and none had majored in the field.

> In fact, right from the beginning, there was a particular lack of specialized teachers in our school. All the teachers teaching us came from sociology, history, and politics, none of them had had a regular professional training (in social work). I was particularly confused during these four years at university, especially in the first two years. I didn't know what to do with this specialty after graduating. The teachers didn't give us too much, and we didn't do a lot of professional internships. But my dream at that time was to be a university teacher, a social work teacher. I thought that if I were to become a teacher in that specialty, I might attenuate the confusion of students who would then be studying that specialty. (20161106_GZQ, pp. 5-6)

She only started to develop a growing interest for what she had learned at university after she started working in a PIO. Only then did she start to "digest" how she could use the theories she studied for four years in the practice of her work. She asked herself "how to internalize the values" conveyed by those theories.

> Only when you come into contact with people who are autistic and mentally handicapped, can you realize the sense of this specialty. After I started to work, I developed a growing passion for this specialty. But at university, I had no choice, I could only study this specialty, my mindset was that since I've been selected, then let's study well. I have always been a good student, I like studying [she laughs], so I studied. (20161106_GZQ, p. 6)

Her attitude was not representative of other members of her cohort. They expressed no interest and their faculty did not strive to nurture their interest. A quick Internet search reveals that in major cities such as Beijing and Hangzhou, social workers' wages lie far behind average local salaries. Authorities make no effort to make social work a reasonably attractive career. The consequences are exemplified by Zuquan's story.

I present above some of the challenges faced by PIPs during their interactions with other social actors, including significant others. These issues include low revenues, the low appeal of the PI sector, and the consequences of these problems. In the last section, I examine how PIPs make sense of these

challenges, what strategies they adopt, and which arguments they advance to support their sensemaking process.

6.3 Making sense of challenges

The examples presented below do not constitute an exhaustive list of the strategies adopted by PIPs to make sense of the challenges they encounter. They are representative of how most of the participants in this research talked about their experiences, the emotions they associated with these challenges, and some of the measures they adopted to cope with these difficulties. Actions that benefited their personal development figured prominently among their sensemaking options, as did a careful selection of social issues and the choice of leaving the sector altogether.

6.3.1 Personal development

In Chapter 1, I suggested that PIPs' motivations are seldom based on selflessness. As in any other sector, personal development constituted an important consideration for individuals engaged in PI activities. The previous two chapters demonstrated this. Personal development is addressed in various manners, as exemplified below.

6.3.1.1 Perspective 1: 'spiritual' development

PIPs often referred to their personal growth, sometimes to the point that they even qualified that growth as a transformation. This growth entailed several aspects, from seemingly trivial skills such as preparing a PPT document to one's sense of self.

> I have been at (name of the organization) for so many years, I loved this work from the very beginning, I loved PI as well. The reason I have maintained this passion for this work up to now is because this work makes me grow constantly, this is a very important point. It makes me grow continuously. I think in the past six years, my transformation as a person is very obvious, my sense of self also, whether in terms of abilities, mindset – in economic terms it has stagnated [she laughs] – in terms of abilities and personality, including all aspects, I feel that personally, I have been transformed in that process.

> From events I did at the very beginning to planning projects and then implementing projects, my personal requirements have been very high in that process. I need to learn continuously, to constantly break through my own (limits). When I started I did not even know what was a PPT, I couldn't do a PPT, because it was different than the things I learned before, I learned chemistry, I worked as a salesperson. Things such as official documents for an office, this kind of project planning, I never did that, I never wrote a PPT. Then I forced myself to learn these little by little, that is, I started from scratch and learned little by little. It means that for me, I feel this work makes every day full of challenges, but I'm very willing to accept these challenges. I'm very excited every time I complete a challenge. Growing so fast has led me to maintain a great enthusiasm towards this work. (20161101_LT, pp. 19-20)

Lan Tian cited Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs to explain that her personal development has already reached the higher levels of the scale proposed by Maslow.

> This job has brought me some recognition (*kending*), there are many aspects. First, this job must make me happy, if I often feel depressed, then this makes no sense. The first element is that this job makes me feel happy. Second, this job helps me to find my own social value. Let's digress a bit, I'm now learning psychology. (…) There are five levels in Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs, you certainly know that, love, sense of belonging, social recognition. Although my bottom layer is not very solid, but at least I have no problem with food and clothing, what is now more important is the pursuit of some spiritual elements or social recognition. I think these aspects make me particularly happy, which allows me to persist doing this thing. [She pauses a few seconds] Wage is a problem (though). (20161101_LT, p. 22)

She felt that her self-esteem, her self-confidence and her self-respect had improved. Self-actualization, one level higher and the last layer in Maslow's scale, was also being at least partially addressed, with morality, creativity and problem solving being used in the design of a full-fledged project such as the one she was responsible for. The satisfaction she derived from her work was not primarily related to the fulfilment of material wants, but to that of spiritual needs. Although the word *jingshen*, rendered as "spirit" in English, doesn't necessarily correspond to the religious sense attributed to that concept in a Western context, it extends without doubt beyond the material realm.

6.3.1.2 Perspective 2: a 'higher' viewpoint

Zhang Ke, not unlike Lan Tian, also alluded to factors that transcended material considerations. During our exchanges, he spoke of finding a girlfriend, marrying and settling down, matters usually closely related to material concerns. He knew

his professional situation and low income would not help achieve that goal, but he did not give up on his PI participation. He sensed that his self-development had been faster than that of other people of his age thanks to his PI engagement. He had worked five years in the local tax office of an east coast city before we met at the Alliance. He had enjoyed that first occupation, which had brought him stability and recognition from peers, relatives and friends. Before that first job, before starting senior high school and passing the *gaokao*, he had already been an active volunteer in a local environmental PIO, spending most of his weekends supporting that organization. He pursued his volunteer work while also working at the local tax office, visiting nursing homes, picking up garbage from local sightseeing areas, trying to raise awareness of these issues and convince more individuals to participate. His engagement in the community brought him a different kind of recognition than his professional occupation, one he seemed to have enjoyed.

> I felt that my self-development at that time was much faster than people of my age. Because as everyone was still thinking about their work, and other very pragmatic things, I probably thought about my team, how do we survive, how do I let people approve, how to make older people recognize me, young people agree with me, and so on. At the same time, there was also more contacts with older people. Because they would tell me that there are different ways of doing things, you are the team leader, you are someone with status, they would raise questions and address them to you, you'd have to judge, you deal with these questions. Pondering these things are ways to exercise your ability. (20160505_ZK, p. 13)

He kept similar motivations in the years that followed. After almost a decade as a volunteer, and five years in his first occupation, Zhang Ke decided to go one step further in his PI involvement. After hesitating for a year, he left the city where he had lived for ten years to develop as a full-time PIP. This is when he joined the Union. That experience, which only lasted a year, did not alter his engagement. In early January 2018, he presented a PI project to an organization that helped kick-start PI projects through small donations. He obtained some funds and expanded his PI activities in his home town. He was still animated by the will to think beyond "pragmatic things," with values such as responsibility and self-esteem playing a prominent role in his narrative.

6.3.1.3 Perspective 3: moving up the 'value chain'

Many PIPs left me with the impression that they were unwilling to leave the sector. Some, such as Lan Tian, told me frankly and directly that they loved their work. Others emphasized how much they had grown, as the three examples above demonstrate. Several PIPs planned for their long-term engagement and intended to seize the best opportunities within the sector to reach managerial positions where issues such as low revenues would constitute smaller problems. Chen Rongrong received offers from private companies and was tempted to leave. With her private life in turmoil at the time of the job interview, she opted for stability in her work. A year later she was working in a managerial capacity for a sizeable private foundation. She enjoyed the upsides of a PI occupation, e.g. working on rural or environmental projects benefiting specific social groups. And she was free of the downsides of her previous job, e.g. poor management and low revenues. Her income had tripled.

Lin Meijiao adopted a similar approach. While her ideal was to work as a project manager dealing with front-line realities, she knew that without prior experience she hardly had a chance to be hired in such a capacity in her early thirties. She settled on taking an administrative role in a newly established institute devoted to the promotion of the PI sector. Her income did not triple, but it increased substantially relative to her previous PI work in a famous private foundation. It did not match her ideals in terms of work content or revenues, but she had pulled one step closer to a certain piece of mind.

Yue Fei, too, planned to go up the "value chain" in his foundation. He hoped in a number of years to become involved in the management of the whole foundation. He had already started to prepare for that day.

> ... this is also (included in) the welfare provided by our foundation, they can pay my tuition fee for one semester. So, I am studying now, understanding the condition of the psychological growth of these special children (mentally handicapped), how to train them, how to communicate with them, it's about this kind of professional things. Later, I also think that... I'd like to have a bigger development at the foundation in the future. I may do more than only operational projects, I may be involved in operating and managing the foundation. After all, if you want to go higher and further, then you need to be involved in all aspects. (20161106_YF, p. 21)

The sensemaking measures presented above were adopted to various degrees by most of the PIPs participating in this research. However, sensemaking was not always related to personal development, as the following examples demonstrate.

6.3.2 Other sensemaking measures

The legitimation challenges described in the second section of this chapter require long processes of adaptation and change. There is no easy fix. Some measures offer practical solutions that can help make sense of these problems.

6.3.2.1 Causes that federate

In an environment that is highly controlled, or at least supervised, by institutions of the party-state, carefully selecting causes to engage with may result in tacit or active support – rather than opposition or lack of support – by the authorities. Chapter 1 raised the issue of the volatility of which topics are deemed sensitive by the authorities, with the added difficulty of local interpretations. However, areas supported by central authorities are likely to generate less resistance at the local levels. Such areas include environmental protection, child development, elderly and community support, etc. More sensitive domains, such as LGBT activism and PI activities to raise awareness about AIDS, not to mention activism related to religious beliefs or political movements, are likely to provoke resistance or even outright suppression.

PIPs who decide to concentrate their efforts on relatively safe targets lower the risk of running into legitimation-related issues. The Union provides an excellent illustration, with most of its actions revolving around improving the situation of children living in rural areas. During our first encounter, Deng Fei explained why FL quickly gained momentum and support after its launch in 2011.

> Yes, we first start from children, which is the easiest (area) everyone can reach a consensus about. What do we generate this way? A confluence.
> (…)
> … when we help children, we can reconcile, even murderers have donated money to us. I can first learn to find a favorable angle, to let all [social] layers learn how to be together and unite. In the past, our society was torn, people mutually injuring each other. Farmers sold vegetables with pesticides in the cities, restaurants used waste cooking oil, the Police arbitrarily fined, doctors received red envelopes. In our country, all ethnic groups tear each other apart. Except

> natural disasters like the Wenchuan earthquake, which can temporarily unite the Chinese, China can no longer find a way to unite everyone. But we have found it: public interest. (20120919_DF, p. 13)

I return to this statement in Chapter 7 in the discussion of our understanding of PI as a construct. The important point here is the emphasis on the cause taken up by FL: children. It is undoubtedly easier to federate a support around children than around mentally handicapped people. We saw in Chapter 5 how PIPs dealing with mentally handicapped people first had to cope with their own representations. In a similar way, any action undertaken for a cause that does not easily "unite everyone" is due to raise questions and to complicate the legitimation process.

6.3.2.2 Creative arrangement

Sensemaking may rely on creative thinking. While this option is less frequent and requires innovative acumen, it may provide a solution to some of the challenges experienced by PIPs. Cheng Feifei represents an interesting case. She was intensely engaged in FL during her university years. She described her involvement in enthusiastic terms, recognizing how her experience had contributed to her growth in a way that would have been impossible through her university activities.

> Working as a volunteer helped me to grow up in ways I could not learn at university. For example, I did a lot of jobs for FL for four years, these jobs led me to better understand FL. I understood that each part was associated with other works, that it is not completely independent. So, when doing one thing, you need to consider how all parties should coordinate and cooperate, what upstream and downstream work relations need to be mapped out. After I started to work, such a habit led me to plan more comprehensively when I did an event or a project. And in the face of many complex things, I can quickly clarify priorities, and then establish a plan to complete (tasks). (WeChat and email exchanges, 8 May 2017)

Feifei illustrated how her active engagement had allowed her to gain skills that proved invaluable in her professional development. She did not choose to become a full-time PIP upon graduating from HR studies, but she remained highly involved. That involvement led to the experiment she started in 2018 at the Union. Through the HR skills she gained at university and during her first two years of work, she set upon helping the Union improve HR management while being remunerated by her new private employer. She found a creative way

of combining her employment with her pursuit of PI engagement without the salary-related downside usually associated with full-time PI work. She did not draw boundaries between PI and non-PI sectors. She thought that PI objectives could be pursued in different capacities, as she had done in her first job, promoting the touristic development of a village in South China. In her new role she was contributing her HR skills to a PIO while maintaining her connection with a commercial corporation. Creativity can be a powerful sensemaking device.

6.3.2.3 Leaving the sector

Probably the most radical sensemaking device of all is to simply leave the PI sector behind and to declare that the experience did not make sense. This is the measure adopted by Bei Peng. Most of the PIPs I met and communicated with did not hide from discussing issues and challenges. Some, like Hu Bing, even expressed doubts about the value and usefulness of their work. None looked at their PI experience as negatively as Bei Peng. His entry into the PI sector upon graduating from university resulted from a failed interview for an accounting position at an online retailer. Determined to find a job while being far from home, he was ready to consider any accounting job.

> The initial reason why I did this job was not because I liked PI or had contacts with PI. When I (first) did this job, I didn't know what was called PI. The initial reason for doing this job was to make money, to earn my living expenses, it allowed me to continue to stay in Beijing. So, I really didn't understand anything, I went in, and I went in still confused [by what PI could be]. (20160422_BP, p. 8)

Things started to unravel in the third and final year of his PI experience. He had previously associated positive feelings with his work.

> (...) Many things happened in 2015, it was really nonsense, I really really disliked it. (...) In 2013, I was looking for it, I was still quite ignorant. In 2014, I worked at full speed, following my boss and meeting peers everywhere, doing projects, feeling the atmosphere [of the whole sector]. 2014 was the busiest year. 2013 was a very slow year, I gradually learned. I had just started to work for a short time, some aspects of my own personality affected the way my work played out, they affected my insights and part of my judgment. Overall, 2014 was also quite good. In 2013, I went to (name of a city). It was the first time that (name of the project) gathered people from the whole country. I was involved. I felt the atmosphere was very good at that time.

He spoke in positive terms about the first two years. In retrospectively making sense of his ultimate disappointment, he blamed himself and traits of his

personality for having clouded his judgement. He seemed to imply that he should have foreseen upcoming issues.

> Why did it feel particularly good in 2014? Why was it so bad in 2015? Because these two years looked like a watershed, people changed, the environment in which I lived changed, not only at (name of the project). In 2013, I was just doing (name of the project), I just did things related to (name of the project), I felt that only (name of the project) was involved in PI. But in 2014, I felt that many people are actually doing PI, many companies are also doing PI. Or maybe some people rely on PI to enrich themselves, maybe some others do PI for their own beliefs. That was how I felt in 2014.
> In 2014, I met a lot of people. At this age, I felt that many people... In my understanding, everybody did PI for the public interest, one's heart went in that direction. As long as it was for the final result, everyone could step back, compromise, or cooperate with each other. This kind of thing, in 2014, I can really summarize in one word: cheerful. In that atmosphere, there was basically no quarrels, no disagreement. People sat down and had a meal, drank, and discussed how they should do things. Then when (...) we visited (other colleagues) from our PI project, or sat together for a meal, friends from all over the country would know each other. This was 2014. Why did it feel good in 2014? In 2014, I bore hardship without complaint, there were not so many complaints, and my salary, relatively speaking, improved. (20160422_BP, pp. 8-9)

Influenced in his second year by his deeply positive views of the PIPs he had observed so far -- his superior in particular -- he could see a future for himself in the PI sector. He associated these views with the whole PI sector. At this point, it appeared that he was idealizing the sector and holding it to these ideal standards.

> Maybe I was wrong. I thought he (his superior) was a person who did PI for the public good. There was no personal gain or personal interest at all, including in terms of relationships or money, no disputes about severing (relationship) with others, ignoring friends, buddying to leaders. I thought there was none of this, at the time. (20160422_BP, p. 10)

But these positive views were replaced by a disapproving assessment and harsh criticism in the third year.

> First of all, the overall environment. I think that the matters I encountered, the people in this sector, it's entirely for their own interests. These interests are not simply about money, it's very difficult to get money from this sector. But there are indeed many benefits other than money. For example, reputation, (...). Maybe it doesn't bring you genuine benefits such as money, but it will bring you other benefits, that's also important.
> I used to think that (name of a famous PIP) was such a person. He is a very down-to-earth person. From the moment I knew him until now, that's exactly how he has done, his purpose is very clear. What he wants is social status, he wants to achieve something in that area, that everyone knows him, he wants to play the role of a leader. It was very annoying at first, I hated him for doing so. It's PI, why do you want things such as coveting fame? I was very annoyed at first. Later, he was actually very open in all his actions: I'm originally doing that for this (purpose), but it doesn't prevent me from doing PI, right? Regardless of my purpose, in the end I'm still doing PI. So, this is how my opinion changed toward (name of a famous PIP). It was very annoying at first, he was one of my leaders.

> In 2015, I learned more about more people. Regarding the overall environment, in fact, everyone wants to do things for their own interests, not just financial interests, but more for reputation or status. Not just in foundations, no matter whether you're doing PI in foundations or in other social organizations. Everyone has a purpose. Maybe I had a certain understanding of the sector at the beginning, and this contradicted my original understanding. My original understanding was that everyone participates to do PI. Of course, you can participate to earn money, to earn your own high salary, that does not matter. But if you are using the purpose of PI to build a network of relationships for yourself, to seek connections, and to push aside others, then I feel this is too low. (20160422_BP, p. 12)

Bei Peng admired his first employer, associating qualities such as selflessness, absolute probity and purity of intentions to his personae. This admiration became disappointment when, after two years working in the sector, Bei Peng started to see in that same individual – and some of his peers – the opposite characteristics: inflated ego following recognition and even admiration in the PI sector, self-interest, questionable expenses not strictly related to his work, even lack of attention to his closest family members. The saint had become a sinner. I am purposely using an ironic tone, as this is how I reacted when reading the interview transcript after the interview.

Two years later after our interview and almost three years after he quit his PI job, Bei Peng had not been involved in any new PI activities. He said that there might be opportunities in the future, but that PI involvement needed to be "pro-active" and "with a "sense of responsibility" (*zerenxin*). My understanding was that his statement implied that his own involvement between 2012 and 2015 had not matched the first criterion. The second criterion set a minimum threshold that had not been crossed by some of the PIPs he encountered during his PI experience.

His overall experience had turned sour in the final year. He described an atmosphere of internal dissension that turned him into the victim of unfair treatment, with different groups carrying different agendas. He was the only PIP I came across during my research who related a climate of such intense backstabbing within an organization. It was a challenge to reconcile his depiction with those of other practitioners I met who worked on the same project. Bei Peng provided a salutary reminder that for each PIP I met and interviewed and who expressed their attachment to their work, many more individuals left the PI sector because they saw no future for themselves in it – not necessarily for the same reason as Bei Peng though.

6.4 Conclusion

After analyzing PIPs' motivations and some of their ideal-type values in the previous chapter, I concentrated in this chapter on the challenges they encountered and the strategies they adopted to make sense of realities that did not correspond to their ideals. I first established that the individual, sectorial and social dimensions of PI engagement are interrelated. Challenges include the apparently trivial matter of explaining one's work to social actors not familiar with the PI sector, the difficulty in hiring and retaining talent who might contribute to strengthening PIOs and the sector, and the lack of support displayed by institutions of the party-state in areas such as social work that they directly controlled. These challenges put into question the choices made by PIPs and the legitimation of PI as both a construct and a sector.

In the face of these challenges, participants deploy various sensemaking strategies to adapt to complex realities. I presented some of the strategies as told by PIPs. The strategies revolved around issues of personal development, cause selection and creative thinking. They demonstrated that, despite PI's low level of legitimation in China today as a construct, as a sector and in terms of its social role, PIPs have already succeeded in building PI into a recognizable reality.

I argue that this reality is in serious need of clarification and re-definition. In Chapter 2 I suggested that the civil society framework was not adapted to this effort and that it could not help us reach a better understanding of PI. In Chapter 4, I presented the narratives of the first PIPs I met in the preliminary stage of my research. Their stories led me to revise early assumptions regarding the conflictual nature of social activism in China. I examined their motivations and values in terms of sensemaking in Chapter 5. In this chapter I have examined their strategies to cope with challenges. It is now time to conclude with a chapter discussing PI, a different construct than charity, and why a fresh approach such as sensemaking provides us a better understanding of PI, its practitioners, its organizations, and its social role.

Chapter 7 Conclusion: Public Interest and Sensemaking

In its early stage, this dissertation was based on the premise that social activists act in opposition to governmental forces and are thus characterized by a contentious mindset. The first individuals I interviewed presented a different version. Their realities were not defined by contention, but by the need to make sense of situations or events they had encountered. By most Western definitions, their actions, and those of participants I met in later stages of this research, could not be assimilated to political participation or social activism.

In this thesis, social activism corresponds to civic participation as defined by Ekman & Amna. Their typology theoretically distinguishes between two forms of political participation: manifest and latent. They posit that this distinction is crucial "to understand new forms of political behaviour and the prospects for political participation in different countries" (Ekman & Amna, 2012, p. 296). "Manifest political participation refers to the public or the political domain, first and foremost," while "[c]ivic participation, on the other hand, refers to activities within the civil domain. Associational involvement and voluntary work are typical examples of such actions that take place outside of the political domain" (ibid). PI engagement is akin to a form of civic participation, i.e. latent political participation.

For most participants, these theoretical distinctions were not as important as the actions in which they were engaged. They considered these actions to be non-contentious. Their stories did not revolve around their struggles or fights against party-state institutions, but on their motivations for "doing PI." Throughout this thesis I attempt, from a social constructivist perspective, to give voice to activists' narratives. Their stories shed light upon their versions of reality and the complexity of those realities, the entanglement of individual, sectorial and social dimensions. They also show how participants made sense of their engagement.

In this final chapter, I suggest that PI is a suitable construct to understand the civic engagement of PIPs and social activism in China. I also review the arguments advanced in this thesis in support of applying sensemaking to extend our understanding of PI and PIPs.

7.1 Public interest: a new understanding of social activism in China

I explained in Chapter 1 that most of the actors who participated in this research used the term "public interest" (*gongyi*) to describe their activities. They saw themselves as "doing public interest" (*zuo gongyi*) rather than being engaged in "charity" or "philanthropy" (*cishan*). In this section, I take a closer look at the concept of *gongyi* and *cishan*, which are often used interchangeably in Chinese, or together, and commonly translated as "charity" in the English-language literature on social activism in China. I start with the participants' own understanding of PI. I continue with an examination of both academic and non-academic sources. These sources, which mirror the ideas and practices of the actors I met, support the adoption of the term "public interest" instead of "charity," "non-profit" or "third sector," to better reflect the motivations of PIPs and their engagement.

7.1.1 gongyi and cishan: from PIPs' perspectives

There is no consensus around the concept of charity in China today. Fang thinks the reason lies in the conflicting origins of the term: the traditional concept of charity in China, inherited from the era of planned economy, and the Western concept of charity. The differing views are hard to reconcile (Fang, 2012, p. 42). During our first meeting, Deng Fei categorically rejected the term *cishan*.

> I never considered that I am doing charity (*cishan*), I think it is public interest (*gongyi*), or a social movement, because I am realizing a wide mobilization to solve a social problem, so I think what I do is more like a social movement.
> I am not a philanthropist (*cishanjia*), without any doubt I am definitely not. I am a journalist actually using PI methods to achieve large-scale societal changes. So, I think I am [what I do is] more like of a social movement. (20120919_DF, p. 12)

Deng Fei's rejection, while not an isolated case, was not the opinion of most PIPs participating in this research. Many struggled to articulate the differences between the two concepts, relying on feelings stemming from their practices. Even if they did not always present well-articulated formulations, they felt the two concepts should be distinguished. Chen Rongrong did not distinguish between *gongyi* and *cishan* when she started to work at the Union. She admitted she had no understanding of PI prior to working in the sector, as her objective was to pursue her journalism career. When she started to explain her new job, she

quickly said she felt that other people associated *cishan* with wealth. Someone had to be rich if she could afford to do *cishan* or charitable work.

> In fact, I now feel that using the word public interest is more appropriate, but before I would use charity, doing good deeds (*shanshi*). However, I find that when I use this word, especially "doing good deeds", people always feel that you must already be wallowing in money to do such a thing. They ask how much benefit I get from it, that's the kind of ideas I feel they have. Therefore, the use of public interest may be more objective, more reasonable.
> Charity is all right, but with charity, people are more likely to feel that it is something relatively noble and exalted (*gaodashang*), but in fact it is down-to-earth.
> (…)
> Differences (between charity and public interest)? In fact, it's not very clear for me [she laughs]. Really! If you ask me whether it's very distinct, it's not, but I feel that there are certain differences. For example, charity is... There are some... [she thinks a few seconds] Oh, it's hard to say. Anyway, I think that charity has an emotional connotation to it, but public interest is a sector (*hangye*), it is a profession (*shiye*), it is a scientific, reasonable, rational behavior. But charity, um, maybe it's more related to personal things, this is my own understanding, I don't know if it's right or wrong. (20160326_CRR, pp. 28-29)

Chen Rongrong pointed to one aspect of the concept *cishan* that is corroborated by academic sources. The use of '*ci'* was originally limited to the familial sphere, where it characterized relationships between children and their parents. It evolved later to encompass the meanings of "love tenderly" and "kindheartedness," thus firmly anchored in the emotional sphere. *Shan* also entails the notion of "kind" (see below, *gongyi in academic sources*).
Like Rongrong, Zhang Ke's understanding gradually evolved. The main driver of his early participation as a volunteer was interest. He did not ponder the sense of his participation or the meaning of concepts such as *gongyi* or *cishan*.

> Actually, there was no big concept. Just like what you just said, I just thought that this activity seemed to be quite meaningful, and then I participated. I joined the local volunteer team in the summer of 2005. It is also very small. I only occasionally joined to participate. Every time I participated in the event, I moved things with them, or did things related to logistics, I called upon other members (*xiao huoban*) [to participate], I informed them, this kind of jobs. (20160505_ZK, p. 4)

But his experience at the Union changed his perspective. He gained a new understanding of notions underlying the concept of PI.

> I think at that time, many young people, including myself before I joined, I thought that PI was simply to do good things, I did not understand the true meaning of PI. (…) after I came here to work, including some projects of the Union, some of the things we did [made me understand PI]. Because Free Lunch and Fight Child Trafficking actually changed national policies. Only then did I realize what is PI. Real PI is to make the majority of people obtain fair [treatment]

> and recognition, and [to provide] everyone with welfare (*fuli*). It's not simply going to a nursing home and provide services to 20 people, 30 people, old people. That is the biggest change [I have experienced] in recent years.
> Many people still remain at [the level] where they [participate] for a small thing. (...) I came to Hangzhou from (name of an eastern city) to a national PIO. I realized that originally, to really do PI, is to do PI for the majority of people, [that is] the public interest (*gonggong de liyi*). It doesn't refer to these types of events that provide guidance for a small group of people, these are only activities. (20160505_ZK, pp. 13-14)

To sum up Zhang Ke's points, PI is about working for the benefit of a community or a large group of individuals to improve their situation. It is a long-term effort aimed at supporting this group, possibly through advocacy leading to a change of public policy.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Rongrong regretted that most PIPs had little or no theoretical foundation when entering the sector. Li Hua did not undergo a formal educational training related to PI or social work, but she had already been working more than ten years as a PIP when she gave me her definition during our first meeting:

> My personal understanding of the word (*cishan*), it is more about giving and top-down, or you are giving. Public interest is about participating, more people join and participate, it is not just about giving, there is a higher element of participation. Actually, this is also a question that I've been thinking about, why is it different? So, I don't use the word "charity," I use more public interest. I think the simplest explanation is that they are different, one is giving, the other is participating, but both are altruistic towards society, I think they are all the same [in that regard]. So, I might have originally thought that charity was somewhat condescending (*jugaolinxia*). Now, I feel that it does not matter if it is condescending, it is also good, as long it is beneficial to society, it's good, it's all good. (20140121_LH, p. 22)

Her main points lay in the participatory aspect of PI-*gongyi* and the elitist tone associated with charity-*cishan*, which corresponded to Chen Rongrong's assessment. For the same reasons, Li Hua decided not to use the term charity. Their opinions were confirmed by the research I did to understand how *gongyi* and *cishan* were explained in academic and non-academic sources.

7.1.2 gongyi and cishan in academic and non-academic sources

Before examining how these two concepts have been discussed in and outside of academia, it is important to note that no distinction is made in the legal texts legislating the sector. Discussing the modernization of charity law in China in

2009, Lee noted that "[A]t the moment, several relevant laws governing the charitable sector adopt the concept of "public welfare" or "public interest" (*gongyi*) in defining the scope of charitable sector activities" (Lee, 2009, p. 358). The 1999

> Public Welfare Donations Law defines "public welfare activities" (*gongyi shiye*) to include: 1) disaster relief, poverty relief, assistance to the disabled, et cetera; 2) education, scientific, cultural, public health and athletic activities; 3) environmental protection and construction of public facilities; and 4) other public welfare activities promoting social development (Lee, 2009, pp. 359-360).

The situation had barely changed in 2016. As with its 1999 predecessor, the text of the new Charity Law issued in March 2016 used *gongyi* as a generic term to qualify the nature of any "charity activity," or, as written in the text, "public interest activities" (*gongyi huodong*). These public interest activities encompassed:

> (1) Poverty alleviation and assistance;
> (2) Eldercare, aid for orphans, aid for the ill, assistance for the disabled, or special aid[18];
> (3) Relief from damage caused by natural disasters, disasters caused by accidents, public health incidents and other emergencies;
> (4) Promotion of the development of areas such as education, science, culture, health, and sports;
> (5) Prevention and control of pollution and other public harms, and protection and improvement of the environment;
> (6) Other public interest activities compliant with the provisions of this law. (chinalawtranslate.com, 21 March 2016)

The new law only mentions *gongyi* five times and never defines the term. This lack of clarity in the legal use of the term *gongyi* reflects a not-so-unusual gap between legal frameworks and social practices (Nunes, Matias, & Costa, 2005, p. 368). It is necessary to look into comments of social practices through academic and non-academic sources to review how observers of the sector explain the differences between *gongyi* and *cishan*, and what these differences imply. I start with non-academic sources.

[18] The targets of this "special aid" (*youfu*) include disabled military staff, demobilized soldiers, veterans, martyrs' dependents, etc.

7.1.2.1 Non-academic sources

Baidu Baike and Hudong Baike, two of the largest online Chinese encyclopedias run by mainland China companies define *gongyi* as follows:

> *Gongyi* literally means 'for the public interest', its substance being the distribution of social wealth. *Gongyi* events (*huodong*) refer to certain organizations or individuals donating their possessions, time, energy and knowledge to society. The content of *gongyi* events includes community services, environmental protection, knowledge dissemination, public welfare, the help of others, social assistance, social security (*shehui zhi'an*), emergency assistance, youth services, charity, associations' activities (*shetuan huodong*), professional services, cultural and artistic activities, international cooperation, etc. (Baidu Baike, Hudong Baike)

The two online encyclopedias did not only describe *gongyi* activities, they also hinted at what they implied for its participants. Articles I found online in blogs and media articles went further in detailing the distinctions between the two terms.

According to one blog,

> "*Cishan* is a thousand-year old tradition, a top-down material help of money and goods. But *gongyi* accompanies and is born of a pluralistic civil society, it is a search for change by social citizens to improve the natural and social environment in which they find themselves, to make it safer and better." (Zhao, 2013)

The same blogger presents an elaborate table comparing eleven aspects of *cishan* and *gongyi*, one of them being their effect (*xiaoli*): *cishan* "soothes current difficulties" (*anfu yanqian de kunnan*) while *gongyi* "seeks fundamental changes" (*xunqiu cong genbenshang gaibian*) (Zhao, 2013). In another webpage, a PIP states that

> "... *gongyi* is something good for everyone, it is not covered in the original concept of helping the poor (*fupinjikun*). For example, environmental protection is something that every one of us needs. Such a public matter was not comprised in this type of kindness of the past, the one consisting in a good person helping the weak". (umiwi.com, 2010)

Interviewed about his charity activities, a PIP named Cheng Fei said that

> "*gongyi* is not *cishan*: for *cishan* you just need to have a heart (*cishan you yi ke xin jiu gou le*), for *gongyi* you need methods (*fangfa he fangshi*), it requires a lot of knowledge (...). In doing *gongyi*, you may learn even more, it made me grow a lot, it also improved the way I conduct myself in society" (Lin, 2015).

Another practitioner highlights the fact that *gongyi*, unlike *cishan*, does not depend on the generosity of a rich donor but on the expertise of a specialized

team able to organize events and to earn money. He opened a clinic for that purpose because doing *gongyi* generated costs, something that, to his regret, many people did not understand. He added that the opening of his clinic aroused suspicion: “many people think that you should not get a penny if you do good things, this is actually not *gongyi*, that is *cishan*” (Yang, 2010).

A blog entry of an organization called *hujiang shetuan* presents definitions, charts and graphs to explain what is *gongyi* and the current situation of the charity sector in China today. It starts with an equation: “gongyi ≠ cishan ≠ showing love” (*xian aixin*), then defines *cishan* and *gongyi*: “*Cishan* is a charitable act that is driven by the psychology of compassion (*cibei de xinli*), it exists since ancient times.” *Gongyi* “is in the public interest, it refers to social public well-being and interests. *Gongyi* activities refer to certain charity organizations and individuals donating properties, time, energy and knowledge to society, *gongyi* is a concept of modern society.” According to this webpage, *gongyi* encompasses *cishan*: the latter is a part of the former “but can certainly not replace *gongyi*”. It echoes Zhao (2013) when comparing their objectives: *cishan* “solves the difficulties” of the people it targets (*dangshiren*) while *gongyi* “aims at solving a social problem” (hujiang shetuan, 2015).

To summarize, *gongyi* is not “just” charitable acts but sustained actions for the public interests; *gongyi* participants intend to solve social problems, not just to temporarily alleviate problems besetting some particular groups; *gongyi* requires a much deeper involvement of participants that can potentially lead to fundamental changes not only of the social problems that are dealt with, but of the practitioners themselves. To use a common contemporary Chinese expression, *cishan* is “aloof and remote” (*gaogao zai shang*) while *gongyi* relies on the active participation of social actors such as volunteers who contribute first and foremost their time and energy to specific actions, thus being more open to the general public.

7.1.2.2 Academic sources

No mention has been made so far of the etymology of the characters composing the words *cishan* and *gongyi*. According to Zhou & Zeng (2006), “*ci* was originally used to characterize familial relationships: a respectful way of naming

one's mother; in association with children's piety towards their parents; the love of parents for their children." The term was then later "extended to signify 'love tenderly' (*lian ai*) and 'kindheartedness' (*ren ai*)." *Shan* means 'auspicious' (*jixiang*) and 'good' or 'kind' as opposed to the notion of *e*, evil (Zhou & Zeng, 2006, p. 2). *Ci* finds its origin in the private sphere of the family while *shan* stands for the moral quality of goodness. *Cishan* is associated with the selfless, hero-like image of the business entrepreneur, a charitable soul sharing his wealth with other not-so-fortunate individuals. It suggests an elitist approach to charity that does not engage a wide public to participate in concrete actions:

> ... *cishan* is a form of motivation (*dongji*), it is also a concept (*guannian*); as well as a kind of behavior (*xingwei*), and a cause (*shiye*). As a motivation, the basic characteristics displayed by *cishan* must be "for others" (*wei ren*) and "no ego" (*wu wo*), a selfless dedication. If it entails any material gain, it cannot be considered real *cishan*. In other words, *cishan* emphasizes giving and does not demand any return. As a concept, the basic characteristics displayed by *cishan* are the promotion of humanitarian spirit. (... ...) In sum, as a behavior, the basic characteristics displayed by *cishan* are to accumulate virtue and carry out goodness as purpose; and as a cause, its objective is to bring regulation, harmonization, remedy and welfare to society and groups. (Zhou and Zeng, 2006, pp. 3-4)

While the authors sometimes refer to *cishan* as part of a wider *gongyi* realm: "the cause of *cishan* is a type of social *gongyi* undertaking which is beneficial to society and groups" (Zhou & Zeng, 2006, p. 5), the differences between the two terms are rarely explained. Zhong's (2013) understanding of the term *cishan* echoes Zhou & Zeng: "*cishan* is a social charitable act of altruism concerned with the poor and vulnerable groups. From the original meaning of the term, the word *cishan* contains a kind of hierarchical concept affiliated to patriarchal culture" which evokes a kind of fatherly love and an unequal status between giver and recipient (Zhong, 2013, p. 16). Wang (2010) confirms this point:

> To a certain extent, *cishan* has become the few wealthy ones giving charitable alms to the poor, it is an unequal affiliation far remote from the equality concept of the modern citizen, civil rights awareness and the spirit of the rule of law. (Wang, 2010, p. 76, cited by Zhong, 2013, p. 16)

Gao and Wang estimate that the all-important position that family occupies in Chinese traditional culture (namely the notion of *jiabenwei*) constitutes a bottleneck for the development of the charity sector in China: it focuses individuals' attention on their families' interests to the detriment of society's interests. To support their argument, they cite, among others, the very low

number of rich Chinese entrepreneurs practicing philanthropy in the manner of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet (Gao & Wang, 2010). Zhong agrees with Gao and Wang (2010) that the central position of family and clan in traditional Chinese culture constitutes an issue, but she does not consider it is a crucial one. She sees China's regime as a greater impediment to popular participation in *gongyi* than individuals' willingness do to so (Zhong, 2013, p. 11). She also argues that the lack of distinction between *cishan* and *gongyi* constitutes an obstacle to the further development of the PI sector, thus necessitating a clarification of the differences between the two notions.

Regarding the linguistic meaning of *gongyi*, there is neither reference to a private dimension nor a family-related connotation. *Gong* stands for public, while *yi*, according to the 2004 edition of the Standard Dictionary of Modern Chinese (*xiandai hanyu guifan cidian*), can mean either affluence (*fuyu*), increase (*zengzhang*), a deeper stage, beneficial or benefit. These linguistic differences are reflected in *cishan* and *gongyi* practices. First, in the recipients of *cishan* and *gongyi* initiatives: "vulnerable groups" in the first case, but the whole of society in the second case[19]; and in the most prominent aspect emphasized in *cishan* or *gongyi* initiatives, respectively: the morality or virtues (*dexing*) of the "one who carries out goodness" (*shishanzhe*) or the "virtuous one;" and the "promotion of equality and civic awareness of the whole society." *Cishan* thus bears paternalistic and particularistic connotations. It "constitutes the initial stage of *gongyi*, and *gongyi* is the advanced form of *cishan*'s development, *cishan* ultimately will evolve into society's *gongyi* covering every single individual" (Zhong, 2013, p. 4).

Zhong's distinction between *cishan* and *gongyi* relies partly on Liu (2010). Liu considers that *cishan*, *gongyi*, *baozhang*, *fuli* and *fuzhi*, in that order, stand for five different stages that represent a progression from "slave society" to "contemporary society," with *cishan*, charity, being the first, most basic stage, and *gongyi*, translated as "philanthropy," constituting the second stage, which

[19] Xu Yongguang, Vice Chairman and Secretary General of Narada Foundation and Vice Chairman of China Youth Development Foundation, a prominent personality in the PI sector, even argues that Mobai, one of the leading bicycle-sharing companies in China, deserved the distinction it received in June 2017 from the First China Social Enterprise Award (*shoujie zhongguo shehui qiye jiang*) due to the public interest nature of its business model and its social, environmental, and financial sustainability (Xu, 2017, pp. XV-XVI).

corresponds to the epoch of "modern" society (*jin shehui* or *xiandai shehui*). While I disagree with the English translations of *cishan* and *gongyi* used by Liu, it is interesting to note that *cishan* is placed at the bottom of a five-stage scale, *gongyi* representing a more advanced step on the progression towards *fuzhi*, or "wellbeing" in its English translation. *Fuzhi* embodies the fifth and ultimate stage of social welfare, a stage in which the state plays a guiding role. This final stage comes after *baozhang* (security) and *fuli* (welfare) (Liu, 2010). A discussion of these five different stages and the eighteen different features Liu uses to compare them and their English translations would go beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is sufficient for my purpose to note that Liu holds *cishan* to be a more basic concept than *gongyi*.

In conclusion, following academic and non-academic observers of the charity sector in China, I consider *gongyi* to be substantially different from *cishan*. Neither "charity" nor "philanthropy" accurately render the meaning of *gongyi*. Using these translations adds another level of confusion to the already blurred meanings of the original Chinese terms. Public interest better reflects the original meaning of *gongyi* and the way PIPs represent their engagement. PI should be understood as a new realm encompassing different levels of involvement and variable purposes, but with one core principle remaining the same: solving a social problem. Ideally, PI addresses the root causes of a problem instead of just alleviating its effects.

7.1.3 PI and its actors

Public interest has become a generic term that encompasses different social actors. Among them are traditional actors often mentioned in the literature on social activism, such as volunteers and full-time staff working in social organizations. I suggest that another type should be added, i.e. individuals working in social enterprises (SEs). In the following pages, I provide an overview of this these three types of PI actors, with a special emphasis on SE workers. I conclude this section with a tentative PIP typology.

7.1.3.1 Volunteers

I mentioned in Chapter 1 that over a hundred million persons participated in volunteering activities in China in 2015 (Yang, 2016), of which 58 million were reported to be active participants in various activities including support for elderly, handicapped and poor people, and also community work. Yang provides the figure of more than 1,161,000 organizations involved in volunteering activities (Yang, 2017). Zhang Ke provides a good example of how important volunteer engagement at a young age is to encourage further PI engagement at a later stage. Shang Fuwen constitutes another example. Upon entering university in a northeastern city, he joined a PIO providing educational support to migrant workers' children. Highly active during his university years, he decided not to look for a job in the sector he had studied for four years, accepting instead an offer by a local PIO. Four years later, he was still working in the sector.

7.1.3.2 Full-time practitioners

The second type of social actors consists of remunerated staff of social organizations. It is unclear how many unregistered PIOs exist in China, the only certainty being that unregistered entities vastly outnumber registered ones. From the official perspective, close to 700,000 social organizations composed the sector at the end of 2016, including government-related social associations (*shehui tuanti*), private non-enterprise units (*minban fei qiye danwei*), and public and private foundations. These organizations worked under a non-profit model and depended on donations by corporations or members of the public. Most of the PIPs who participated in this research belong to this group, particularly private non-enterprise units (see Appendix 1). In their cases, PI is a profession they have chosen to tackle certain social problems.

7.1.3.3 SE workers

The third type of social actors are employees of social enterprises (SEs). Social enterprises are organizations managed on a for-profit basis while pursuing PI objectives. The idea of the social enterprise was introduced as an attempt to provide solutions addressing social and environmental problems not solved by

other social actors. At the core of the concept of the social enterprise lies the principle of applying business strategies to achieve philanthropic goals (Zhao, 2012, p. 31). Again, I prefer to use the term public interest instead of philanthropy, which, like its Chinese equivalent *cishan*, connotes a top-down benevolent approach that does not match PIPs' ideas and practices. According to Zhao,

> Scholars at the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau and social enterprise advocates such as Lü Zhao, the founder of the Non-Profit Incubator, have begun to translate social enterprise into 社会创业 (social startup) or 公益创业 (startup for public good). Lü says he believes this translation "provides a solid cultural basis for the development of social enterprise." (Zhao, 2012, p. 33)

"To set up a social enterprise is becoming a popular career choice on the mainland," even if there exist few examples of successful SEs (He, 20 Sept. 2012). However, the concept of SE constitutes a novelty in China, as it was only introduced a little more than a decade ago. It remains poorly understood: "Government officials feel confused about the concept of social enterprise" ... "Why should they support a [*qiye*] [enterprise] in the charity area… You need to first explain to them what social enterprise is not about—namely, it is not a for-profit corporation—and then you need to explain what it is about" (Zhao, 2012, p. 33). To an even greater extent than for the terms charity (*cishan*) or public interest (*gongyi*), there is currently no widely accepted definition and understanding of what the term of SE entails. The situation is not specific to China: "we would argue that the definition of social entrepreneurship today is anything but clear" and has become a catchword for "all manner of socially beneficial activities" (Martin & Osberg, 2007, p. 30).

In his influential paper "The Meaning of 'Social Entrepreneurship'," Dees (2001) provides a definition that is often referred to when discussing the concept. He first clarifies the term "entrepreneurship," relying on economists such as Jean-Baptiste Say, Joseph Schumpeter, Peter Drucker and Howard Stevenson. Using their insights, he then suggests the following definition, which, he cautiously adds, is an "idealized" one:

> Social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:
> • Adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value),
> • Recognizing and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission,
> • Engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning,
> • Acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand, and

> • Exhibiting heightened accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created. (Dees, 1998/2001, p. 4)

The second, third and fourth points characterize the business entrepreneur as much as the social entrepreneur while the first and final points constitute the essential features that distinguish the latter. "Social entrepreneurship signals the imperative to drive social change, and it is that potential payoff, with its lasting, transformational benefit to society, that sets the field and its practitioners apart" (Martin & Osberg, 2007, p. 30).

Building on Dees' foundational work, other scholars have attempted to precisely define social entrepreneurship. Martin and Osberg identify three essential components of the context, characteristics and outcome of social entrepreneurship:

> We define social entrepreneurship as having the following three components: (1) identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lacks the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own; (2) identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable state's hegemony; and (3) forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium ensuring a better future for the targeted group and even society at large. (Martin & Osberg, 2007, p. 35)

This definition can be applied to Li Hua, Ma Zhuoya, Liu Huimin and Li Wan, the four participants who worked as founders or employees of SEs at the time I interviewed them. Li Hua founded her organization more than ten years ago. She developed a network that now spans more than thirty Chinese cities and provides accounting services to local PIOs. Liu Huimin, after four years spent in a famous private foundation, decided to establish an SE providing two types of services. On one hand, it acts as a recruiter for PIOs looking for talents. On the other it provides CSR services to large corporations, linking them with PIOs that specialize in the domains targeted by those corporations. It thus helps corporations to raise their social responsibility profile and PIOs to benefit from cooperating with a large enterprise. Ma Zhuoya worked for an SE selling agricultural products from counties officially classified as poor. Li Wan was an associate in an SE providing CSR services to large corporations, in a way similar to Liu Huimin's. The four organizations had reached different levels of

development by 2018, with Li Hua's and Liu Huimin's fairing best in terms of sustainability. All of them were registered as for-profit companies, since the status of SEs remains legally ill-defined in China to this day. Various attempts have been undertaken to clarify the status of SEs, with cities like Chengdu being at the forefront.

> What are social enterprises? Chengdu has made it clear that they are a specifically designed type of enterprises which have to be registered by the enterprise registration authority; that their purpose and primary goals are to help solve social problems, improve social governance, serve the interests of disadvantaged and special groups or communities; that they use innovative business models and market-oriented operations as their main means; that in accordance with their social goals, the profits they generate are re-invested in their own operations, in the communities they are located or in public interest undertakings; and that their social goals are sustainable and stable. (Liu, 2018)

As of June 2018, I am not aware of a law having been passed at the national level. But several of the elements adopted by Chengdu correspond to the main characteristics highlighted in the literature on SE. These characteristics operate within the boundaries of two business strategies:

> 1. Non-profit with earned income strategies: a social enterprise performing hybrid social and commercial entrepreneurial activity to achieve self-sufficiency. (…)
> 2. For-profit with mission-driven strategies: a social purpose business performing social and commercial entrepreneurial activities simultaneously to achieve sustainability. In this scenario, a social entrepreneur operates an organization" (Abu-Saifan, 2012, p. 26-27)

Only Ma Zhuoya had ceased to work for an SE by June 2018. She had returned to a PI project where she had volunteered as a university student. She was also the only of the four not personally invested in the establishment or management of the SE. In terms of motivations, the core principle animating these four persons did not distinguish them from other PIPs who participated in this research: their purpose was to solve social problems, directly or indirectly. Li Hua was presented in Chapter 4. Liu Huimin and Li Wan achieved these objectives indirectly through their support of other PIOs, providing services that either facilitated or supported their operations. Ma Zhuoya had worked for an SE selling agricultural products from poor counties in the hope of helping local farmers to generate sufficient income. This would allow them to stay in their native rural regions, thus slowing down rural depopulation and aging, and contributing to easing social phenomena such as left-behind children growing without parents. Entrepreneurial PIPs are extending the boundaries of the PI

sector, pursuing social objectives while operating their SEs like commercial enterprises. I suggest that such individuals should now be included in the PI sector.

In the first part of this concluding chapter, I reiterated that public interest is a more appropriate construct to reflect the motivations and goals of the social activists I met during my research. This proposition is founded on the practices narrated by activists as well as my observations during fieldwork. It also relies on academic and non-academic sources discussing the constructs of *cishan* and *gongyi* and their differences. Public interest, as an activity, is characterized by a high level of participation and a focus on solving social problems, not just easing their consequences. As a sector, it comprises social organizations that rely on volunteers and full-time practitioners for their operations. It also consists of social enterprises and the individuals who staff this new, hybrid type of organization that operates like commercial companies but pursues public interest objectives.

In the next section, I propose a tentative typology of PIPs based on their degree of commitment.

7.1.3.4 Core-proximity-fringe: a tentative PIP typology

In the course of this research, I met individuals who laid different degrees of importance on their PI involvement. From all-around involvement throughout a long period of time down to temporary participation as a volunteer, three broad categories can be distinguished: the core, signifying a deep commitment that few elements, e.g., catastrophe-like events, are likely to stop; the proximity, i.e., an active participation over a long period of time, but one that has already been placed under strain and could be put into question; and the fringe, the most densely populated category, made of temporary volunteers and individuals who do not transform their PI participation into a long-lasting and more solid involvement.

Core PIPs. In most cases, individuals who belong to this category work full-time either for PIOs or SEs. But this does not constitute a prerequisite. Hu Yihua, with

more than fifty percent of his time spent on PI activities, including an active participation in the development of Free Lunch in Africa, belongs to this category. Zhang Ke, who joined a volunteer organization at 16 and became its leader in his early twenties, opted to become a full-time PIO employee in his mid-twenties. In 2018, not thirty yet, he has been busy setting up his own environmental PIO, which was awarded grants and support from Chinese and international institutions. Niu Lili, a five-year full-time PIP, carefully planned her transition from the Union to another PIO who would allow her to improve her skills in different areas. More than two years later, she is extremely satisfied with her choice and sees herself as able to further grow in the PI sector. Cao Jin gave up journalism to become communication officer in an environmental PIO. Five years later, he headed this organization. The arguments he laid down during our first encounter in 2015 were still providing him with strong motivations three years later: a sense of achievement at the personal, organizational, and sectorial levels, notwithstanding all existing challenges at the three levels.

Members of the core have established PI as an essential part of their lives, they cannot see themselves leaving the sector. They have been deeply involved without interruption for at least five years, and only a major crisis or traumatic event would result in a disengagement from PI. This could be, among other factors, the political climate turning a PI field into forbidden or risky territory, or high pressure from family members due to material or other reasons leading to the painful decision of stopping PI involvement.

Members of the core work in areas that they consider to be of paramount social importance. I could list some of these domains, such as, broadly defined, projects revolving around child development or child protection, handicapped people care, support of the PI sector through targeted services (e.g., accounting, HR, consulting, legal services…), environmental protection, etc. But proximity or fringe PIPs also work in these areas.

The fact that these topics are identified by the party-state as non-sensitive constitutes a major factor in making them potential fields of PI engagement. But the fundamental reasons for a core commitment lie in PIPs' motivations, values, and identities, as analyzed in the previous chapters. Core PIPs might not have started their PI participation in a planned and pro-active manner, as demonstrated by Liu Shu, who joined a PI initiative because she was asked by a family

member, or Chen Rongrong, who started to work for a PIO because she had moved to a new city to live with a boyfriend. But at one point of their involvement, not only did they realize that it would continue, they consciously articulated the reasons for its extension into a long-term future.

Finally, another feature that distinguishes core PIPs from the other two categories lies in the joy that these participants expressed. They took pleasure, sometimes even reveled, in their PI engagement.

Proximity PIPs. Individuals who belong to this category are either volunteers or employees in PIOs or SEs. Zhu Xia worked more than four years in a child welfare initiative. She decided to study again to improve her communication and management skills. But almost two years into her studies, she hadn't decided yet whether she would go back to the PI sector or work in another field. After five years as a full-time PIP, Hu Bing was still fighting with his doubts regarding the usefulness of his work. Added to his uncertain personal future growth perspective, and the cost of living in one of the largest cities in China, it made it possible that, although he was attached to PI values, he might leave the PI sector at a later point of time. Li Wan never had an easy time in the social enterprise where he has been working as a CSR consultant for more than three years after being a volunteer and a full-time employee in post-disaster areas. But the situation became even more challenging in 2018 following the overall slowing-down of the Chinese economy and the reduction of corporate budgets being allocated to CSR projects. During her years of PI engagement, Ma Zhuoya has gone through a rollercoaster of emotions. She first volunteered in an initiative fighting child abduction, where she had to cope with difficult emotional challenges, such as communicating with parents deeply pained by the loss of a child. Her experience as a SE employee tested her abilities and motivations. She finally returned to the initial project fighting against child abduction, but without any clarity about the direction of her future engagement.

In many ways, these proximity members cherish their PI engagement, they attach a lot of importance to it, and would prefer pursuing their career in the PI sector. But that is not to say that they cannot see themselves leaving the sector. While their PI involvement, in different forms, has already lasted five years or longer, they face various issues that could quickly develop into crises, or at least strong enough arguments for them to disengage from PI. These issues might both be

personal reasons such as doubts about their work or job fatigue, or macro factors such as the political climate or the economic environment. In terms of values and motivations, there is little to distinguish proximity and core PIPs, but difficult crisis-like situations could force the former to reassess their commitment, or, in other words, to re-start a sensemaking process.

Fringe PIPs. Most individuals who have been active in the PI sector at one point belong to that category, especially the vast amount of the 135 million of volunteers active in China according to 2016 figures (Yang, 2017, see section 1.1.1). Fringe PIPs also include individuals who started to work full-time for PIOs, but who either quickly quit, and/or felt disenchanted with the realities they encountered after several years, like Bei Peng (see 6.3.2.3). Their values and motivations were unlikely to constitute the main reasons for their PI participation, and they were not substantially altered by their PI experience. Very few of the participants I interviewed during this research can be classified in this category. Bei Peng, already mentioned, is probably the only one. Most Guangzhou FL volunteers showed a level of commitment to the initiative that would not justify their presence in that group. While some of them lowered their level of participation after 2015, none of them completely stopped. On the contrary, four out of nine became full-time practitioners in the following years. They illustrate how fluid the separation is between core, proximity, and fringe categories.

Fluidity of the categories. It would be incoherent with the social constructivist approach to create a typology relying on categories others than those enounced in PIPs' narratives. Several of the PIPs who participated in this research started in one category, but they had moved to another a few years later. Remarkable examples are provided by You Yunchuan, Li Wen, Wang Zhao, and Cheng Feifei. Originally core members who helped managed all FL-related volunteer activities in the Guangzhou region, they finally decided to become full-time PIPs. Li Wen set up a PIO aiming at helping patients in desperate situations. You Yunchuan became its first full-time employee, before being rejoined by Li Wen herself, and Wang Zhao, a year later. Li Wen, while busy with her current activities, was already planning the next stage, an incubator helping teenagers to transform PI ideas into PI projects. While I was partially surprised by Wang Zhao's decision to become a full-time PIP, You Yunchuan's evolution was

foreseeable. He had evoked the possibility of becoming a full-time PIP since our early encounters in 2014 and 2015. He was only restrained by material considerations regarding the education of his daughter. Once local laws allowed non-local residents to send their children to public schools, the financial pressure decreased, and he could finally choose full-fledged PI commitment. Following her FL participation, Li Wen had then worked two years for a SE with an ambitious agenda. After the SE closed down, she started to plan her own PI projects. As for Cheng Feifei, she was engaged in a full-time experiment that I described in sections 4.3.4.3. and 6.3.2.2. I would have classified these four individuals in the proximity domain at the start of my research. As I neared its conclusion, they had moved to the core.

After proposing a tentative typology of PIPs, I now review and sum up the arguments laid down throughout this thesis in support of the adoption of sensemaking as a theoretical approach to study PIPs such as those who participated in this project.

7.2 Sensemaking instead of civil society

One of the most remarkable social changes over the last two decades in China has been the development of social organizations and of the number of people involved in these organizations. Official figures present a story of steady growth that makes it possible today to speak of an institutionalized sector. The figures, however, say very little about the motivations animating a growing number of individuals to engage in PI initiatives in China today.

7.2.1 Contributions

As previous chapters have demonstrated, a better understanding of PIPs' motivations can be achieved by applying a social constructivist approach revolving around sensemaking.

7.2.1.1 The individual at center stage

Concentrating on PIPs' narratives made it possible to recognize emerging traits of their identities, as well as ideal-type values driving and sustaining their involvement. Sensemaking, unlike the civil society framework, does not place "the state at center stage," nor does it adopt the position that "the state generally acts as a diabolus ex machina"—unless participants' narratives tell stories that carry such a plot. O'Brien has cautioned against (2003, p. 60) these two features. In adopting sensemaking, my goal was to respect the narratives of PIPs, to place "the individuals at center stage," to paraphrase O'Brien. One of the most important outcomes was to cast aside the contentious lenses of the civil society framework and to concentrate instead on PIPs' narratives. The state was not absent from their stories, but it was only one of the actors on the PI stage.

> Actually, when our project enters these areas, the most important is that both parties [the recipient school and its local authorities] are willing to do so. Even if there is only a little bit of coercion, there will be difficulties. Because a lot of things are built on a voluntary basis. When our volunteers supervise, it is not a day-to-day supervision, it's more like occasionally checking what's going on. Therefore, the principle of a voluntary approach is very strong, you must have such a willingness to apply for FL, for us to be willing to support you. It's not like we think this area needs to support FL, so we're forced to provide. In fact, this is very bad, and it is not too good for operating the project. (20160326_CRR, p. 36)

In her example, Rongrong explained that a volunteer approach must be adopted by all involved parties for a PI scheme to be implemented successfully and achieve its objective of solving a social problem. A top-down approach cannot result in a successful outcome. Rongrong expressed the opinion that PI was not bestowed—even less, imposed—on recipients, but that PIPs and the groups they support must agree on the way forward for a successful long-term outcome. This is reminiscent of Freire (1981) and of principles of equality between the supporting side and the receiving side.

7.2.1.2 A holistic and flexible approach

Aligned with social constructivism, sensemaking can also help a researcher avoid falling into "long established dualisms" —in the case of civil society, one could speak of a trialism—thanks to its ability to retrospectively process complex realities into articulated stories.

> A process point of view invites us to acknowledge, rather than reduce, the complexity of the world. It rests on a relational ontology, namely the recognition that everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things. Therefore, long established dualisms such as mind and body, reason and emotion, humanity and nature, individual and collective, organism and environment, agency and structure, ethics and science, need to be overcome. (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p. 3)

I did not identify such oppositions in most PIPs' narratives. This is not to say that institutions related to the party-state in China do not play a major role in supervising and influencing social organizations, as exemplified in Rongrong's example above. But PIPs' narratives did not primarily focus on these aspects. Another advantage presented by sensemaking lies in its flexibility and the number of topics to which it can be applied. In Sensemaking in Organizations (1995), Weick reviewed the sensemaking literature, which covers an extensive scope of topics including disaster-related situations and changes in business and industry. Sensemaking occurs in many situations and environments. It had seldom been applied to social organizations—Crowley (2003) being an exception—and never to individuals working in social organizations in China.

7.2.1.3 Witnessing the process of legitimation

"The problem of legitimation inevitably arises when the objectivations of the (now historic) institutional order are to be transmitted to a new generation" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 93). What the PI sector is experiencing today in China cannot be assimilated to the process of one generation transmitting an understanding of a crystallized institution to the next generation. The current generation of PIPs, in interaction with other social actors, is shaping the PI sector, strengthening its institutionalization. Through their participation and involvement, PIPs are also advancing the sector's nascent legitimation. Adopting sensemaking allows espousing the perspective of PIPs to examine which challenges they encounter during this process. Chapter 6 provides several examples of such challenges. As stated by a few PIPs, "doing *gongyi*" was much harder yesterday than it is today, and harder today than it will be in the future. Sensemaking allows us to retrace how PIPs perceive the evolution of these difficulties and how they make sense of them in the course of their PI practice, as discussed by Lan Tian:

> There are more and more people around us, doing things has become smoother and smoother. When you want to do something, you discover that a lot of hands stretch out to help you. We often say that an organization has an aura, when your aura is made of positive energy, the people around you will... how to say? In Chinese, we say cherish the same ideals and follow the same path. You will then attract more and more people with positive energy to do things together. You will then feel, you will then feel a very strong aura around you, a lot of people, a lot of caring people, you will sense that in doing this thing, you are not a lonely person. You will know... You will feel a particularly strong sense of security, if you want to do something you know there must be a lot of people willing to help you. If we want to do an event, although this event is hard to do, we believe it doesn't matter, there will be a lot of people willing to do it. This is the trust that people around us place in us, the self-confidence that comes from volunteers and the atmosphere (around us). (20161101_LT, p. 15)

While acknowledging that her work remained difficult, Lan Tian spoke about growing social recognition. According to her, this constituted one of the most important reasons for the growing number of individuals supporting and participating in PI activities, and a step in the direction of PI's legitimation.

7.2.1.4 Axiological concerns as part of the sensemaking process

Values constitute an essential part of an individual's belief system. In extracting cues from PIPs' narratives, I illustrated in Chapter 4 how axiological concerns can enrich our understanding of individuals' narratives. I identified three ideal-type values: responsibility, empathy and self-esteem. I also suggested that other values might be added to this nascent system, but more research is needed to further explore the value system of PIPs.

7.3 Further research directions

This thesis is mainly an exploratory study in terms of its use of sensemaking. Further research could be undertaken in that field, including the concept of sensegiving, that would allow a deeper understanding of how sensemaking works at the organizational and sectorial levels.

7.3.1 Sensegiving

This thesis revolves around sensemaking,

> … the processes of the social construction of plausible meanings when discrepant cues interrupt daily practice, for instance new knowledge, where practitioners need to create new meaning on how to change their practices (Marshall and Rollinson, 2004; Weick *et al*., 2005; Corradi *et al*., 2010). Sensemaking is therefore about the processes of meaning construction and reconstruction as an attempt to develop a framework of own experiences related to own practices and the organisational reality (Weick *et al*., 2005; Voronov, 2008).
> (Filstad, 2014, p. 6)

The other side of the sensemaking coin is sensegiving, which "refers to the processes of attempting to influence the sensemaking of others" (ibid). Research pertaining to sensegiving could be undertaken to better understand the importance of PIOs' leaders and PI celebrities and how they influence the sensemaking processes of other PIPs, especially younger volunteers and employees who have entered the sector.

An example of sensegiving was provided by Zhang Ke's reflection on his past volunteering experience. He gained a new understanding of PI after he joined the Union, concluding that his previous volunteering activities did not qualify as real PI. "Real" PI would imply a large number of individuals creating a stronger movement, going beyond the simple organization of an event or an activity.

7.3.2 Boundary spanning

I originally intended to concentrate on both sensemaking and boundary spanning, but it proved too much for one Ph.D. Further research on boundary spanning could provide insights into the roles of individuals such as Deng Fei. Boundary spanners create links between social actors and organizations. They bridge resources that had been separate from each other. Tushman (1977) considers that boundary spanning facilitates innovation. It enables the diffusion of information, knowledge and competence across an organization, a sector, and possibly between previously unrelated actors. This is particularly important in the current context, for example with SEs' innovative attempts at leveraging both corporate and PI resources. I don't know if Lan Tian had boundary spanning in mind when she evoked the size of her life circle:

> I often tell one sentence to other people. What I gain doing PI is much more than what I could obtain doing any other job, and certainly much more than what other people obtain. These gains do not stem from my incomes, they come from my social knowledge system. For example, I also worked inside companies, I knew the group of people I was working with inside the companies, everyone's

> relationship was just at the level of colleagues. Maybe some individual relationships were better, but it was hard to open our hearts. Now in most cases, it's off to work, back home, with only a few friends around, and a very small life circle. But as a PI practitioner, my life circle is infinite, up to the whole country, to the whole city (of Hangzhou). Because we might have volunteers at every corner. With PI, your life circle will be infinite, your social knowledge system will be infinite. It even includes... that is too big, I first talk about small things [she laughs]. (20161101_LT, p. 24)

She laughed when she reached the last sentence, finally tempering the enthusiasm that had steadily grown while she was talking. I did not ask her what she meant by "infinite life circle" at the moment. Many of the PIPs I approached worked across diverse social groups, communicating with an impressive array of stakeholders and actors. These included the social groups they supported, donors and sponsors from the general public and the corporate world, volunteers who lent their time or expertise to implement various aspects of a given PI project, media workers who considered promoting their initiatives, government officials whose approval and help they might seek, and celebrities whose social visibility might confer credibility on the actions. The same PIP might possibly come across all these social actors, and others not listed here, for the same project they have also designed, as was the case for Lan Tian.

7.3.3 Improved typology

The tentative typology of core, proximity, and fringe categories presented in section 7.1.3.4 deserves to be further researched. The motivations, values, and other features that lie at the heart of a PIPs' belief system compose a complex matrix that need to be expanded in order to better understand what leads to PI engagement.

7.4 A few last words

I often quoted PIPs who had participated in this research project. These individuals generously gave me their time and attention. I feel it would be improper to conclude without giving them the last say. I start with Cao Jin, who began as a communication officer in a provincial environmental PIO. He told me during our first meeting that his PI career had gone through ups and downs, his

faith in the possibility of doing good things during one phase giving way to questioning and doubts in the next. Two years after the interview, he was the only remaining member of the three-person team that led the PIO when we first met in 2015. This is what he wrote during a WeChat dialogue:

> I understand the entire PI domain as an ecosystem. In terms of roles, there are strong and weak (players). In terms of functions, entrepreneurs, foundations, volunteers, PIOs, etc. are all indispensable elements in this system that carry different functions. Finally, the formation of this ecosystem certainly is a process. At the beginning, there are many conflicts and contradictions. However, as we grow together, a harmonious symbiotic ecosystem will certainly take form. So, as a whole, I am very optimistic. (20170828, word document sent by WeChat)

I wasn't so much impressed by his optimism in the future development of the PI sector as by his description of a symbiotic ecosystem. I thought of Li Hua, Hu Yihua, Lan Tian and other PIPs who would probably agree with Cao Jin that this ecosystem is gradually taking shape.

Ye Bo had to fight for each improvement that, through his organization, he obtained for the condition of hemophiliac people in China. That included growing medical coverage across cities. The coverage made the difference between non-treatment and treatment. Non-treatment resulted in heavy physical handicap. Treatment included reimbursed medical expenses that helped ensure that the patient would lead a near-normal life. Ye Bo could have been very critical when talking about the government. Instead, he seemed to constantly take their perspective, which probably explains how he had built a very effective working relationship with departments of the Ministry of Health. He did not think that the criticism addressed to governmental bureaus by some of his PI peers was justified. They were discontent with the slow reaction of governmental services after receiving their complaints regarding a social issue. This is what Ye Bo told me:

> … you see for all the questions raised by (name of his organization) to the government, there must finally be a solution. What I actually see is that a lot of public interest organizations do not suggest a method when they address the government regarding some questions, that is the problems they raise are like a deadlock. I give you an example. Our government's decision-making results from the mutual cooperation and control between multiple departments, this kind of model. If you can clarify a problem line by line and pass it to the various departments, this matter can be resolved. Whereas if you mix it all together and then pass it to the government, it cannot be solved. I don't know whether this is intentional or unintentional, or if it's a problem of capacity, I don't know. But what I see is a lot of public interest organizations, especially disease-related PIOs,

> what they pass to the government cannot be solved by any governmental department. It would have to rise to the levels of the State Department, to President Xi, or to Premier Li to be resolved. (20170314_YB, p. 20)

Ye Bo had reached a sufficient level of understanding of governmental departments to know what kind of input would be left unattended. PIPs needed to present problems that the receiver would be able to handle and solutions that could be implemented easily.

I conclude with the person I interviewed first, before I started this project. Deng Fei knew very well that support and participation of various social actors was facilitated when PI projects were aligned with governmental priorities. This is why FL had developed so quickly after its launch in 2011. He made this assessment about PI during our first encounter:

> In the past, our society was torn, people mutually injuring each other. Farmers sold vegetables with pesticides in the cities, restaurants used waste cooking oil, the Police arbitrarily fined, doctors received red envelopes. In our country, all ethnic groups mutually tear apart each other. Apart from natural disasters like the Wenchuan earthquake, which can temporarily unite the Chinese, China can no longer find a way to unite everyone. But we have found it: public interest. (20120919_DF, p. 13)

It took me a long time to ask Deng Fei again what he thought about his own statement, years later. I asked him while completing my thesis, almost six years after his enthusiastic assessment of PI's power of unity. He still believed in PI as a way to unite people to work together on solving social problems. But, echoing Ye Bo, he said that the main problem lay in PIOs' and PIPs' limited abilities and competence. He thought creating a comprehensive training system would improve PIPs' skills. It would also ultimately benefit the whole sector. At the time he had been working on that project for three years.

Individuals like Cao Jin, Ye Bo and Deng Fei, in very different ways, have put PI at the center of their lives. PI, as a construct and a sector, has helped them make sense of their lives. A continued growth of the sector, accompanied by rising competence in tackling social problems, is likely to gradually benefit its legitimation in the future.

Appendix: List of Participants

	Coded names	PI area	Role	Status	Type of org	Scope	Age range	Years in PI	Data	Date	Education
1	Deng Fei (real name)	Rural welfare	Founder and leader P	A	P	N	30-39	>5	I + C	2012 – now	Journalism
2	Hu Yihua (real name)	Rural welfare	Legal counsel V	A	P	N	30-39	>5	I + C	2014 – now	Law
3	Li Hua	Accounting services	Founder and leader P	A	E	N	50-59	>10	I + C	2014 – now	Accounting
4	*Yu Jianrong* (real name)	Rural welfare	Founder and leader V	A	P	N	50-59	>5	I	Jun. 2014	Law & rural issues
5	You Yunchun	Child nutrition	Supervisor and counsel V	A	P	N	40-49	>5	I + C	2014 – now	Graphic design
6	Cao Jin	Environment	Communication officer P	A	M	R	20-29	>5	I	Oct. 2015	Journalism
7	Wu Hongwei	Child nutrition	Supervisor and counsel V	A	P	N	30-39	>5	I	Nov. 2015	Journalism
8	Liu Shu	Child nutrition	Donation manager P	A	P	N	30-39	>5	I + C	Nov. 2015	Electron. Info.
9	Wen Zhen	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	30-39	>5	I	Dec. 2015	Law Civil service
10	Fan Lina	Child nutrition	Coordinator V	A	P	R	20-29	3-5	I	Dec. 2015	HR
11	Feng Shaodi	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	20-29	3-5	I	Dec. 2015	Accounting
12	Li Wen	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	30-39	3-5	I + C	Dec. 2015	Economics & business
13	Han Xingyi	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	20-29	3-5	I	Dec. 2015	HR
14	Wang Zhao	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	40-49	3-5	I + C	Dec. 2015	Printing
15	Bian Hongwu	Child nutrition	Coordinator/supervisor V	A	P	R	20-29	3-5	I	Dec. 2015	n.a. Civil service
16	Cheng Feifei	Child nutrition	Various tasks V	A	P	N	20-29	>5	C	2015 – now	HR
17	Chen Rongrong	Child nutrition	Donation manager P	O	P	N	20-29	3-5	I + C	2015 – now	Journalism
18	Bei Peng	Child nutrition	Accountant P	S	P	N	20-29	3	I	April 2016	Accounting
19	Niu Lili	Child welfare	Project manager P	O	P	R	20-29	3-5	I + C	2016 – now	Social work
20	Zhang Ke	Community-based activities	Project manager P	O	n.a.	L	20-29	>10	I + C	2016 – now	Senior high school
21	Zhu Xia	Child welfare	Team leader P	O	P	R	20-29	3-5	I + C	2016 – now	Journalism
22	Lan Yaoli	Child nutrition	Local manager P	A	P	L	20-29	3-5	I	May 2016	Senior high school
23	Ma Zhuoya	Child trafficking Poverty alleviation	Coordinator – V Coordinator – P	O O	P E	N R	20-29	>5	I + C	2016 – now	Accounting
24	Shang Fuwen	Child welfare	Teacher – V Coordinator – P	O A	M P	L N	20-29	>5	I + C	2015 – now	Tourism
25	Huang Linglong	Child trafficking	Coordinator P	A	P	N	40-49	>5	I + C	2015 – now	Sales
26	*Pei Yanni*	Autism & mental handicap	Founder and leader P	A	M	L	40-49	>5	I	Oct. 2016	Senior high school
27	*Jorge*	Local development	Founder and leader P	A	M	L	50-59	>10	I	Oct. 2016	Religious studies
28	Lan Tian	Child support	Project manager P	A	M	R	30-39	>5	I	Nov. 2016	Chemistry, sales
29	Guo Zuquan	Mental handicap	Project manager P	S	M	L	30-39	10	I	Nov. 2016	Social work
30	Yue Fei	Mental handicap	Coordinator P	A	F	L	30-39	>10	I	Nov. 2016	English
31	Jin Min	PI development	Training manager P	A	F	N	30-39	>10	I	Nov. 2016	Social work
32	Hu Bing	Child education	Teaching support P	A	M	R	20-29	3-5	I	Nov. 2016	Int'l politics & anthropology
33	Liu Huimin	Child welfare CSR/recruit.	Team leader – P Founder and leader – P	O A	E	N	20-29	3-5	I	Nov. 2016	Advertising
34	Zhang Li	Hemophilia	Project manager P	A	M	N	20-29	>5	I + C	2016 – now	Journalism
35	Lin Meijiao	PI development	Project supervisor P	O	F	N	30-39	>5	I	2016 – now	Administration
36	Ye Bo	Hemophilia	Founder and leader P	A	M	N	40-49	>10	I	Mar. 2017	None
37	Li Wan	Disaster relief CSR	Team leader – P Consultant – P	S A	M E	N	20-29	3-5	I + C	2016 – now	Electronics

Explanatory caption:

- Role: P = professional, V = volunteer
- Status: A = still active in the same organization, O = has left the organization, S = has left the PI sector
- Type of organization: M = *minban*, F = foundation, P = project registered as a fund under a foundation, E = social enterprise
- Scope: N = national, R = regional, L = local
- Data: I = interview, C = prolonged contacts
- *Names in italic*: respondents who refused to be labelled as PI practitioners

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