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# **Dancing through the Lightning Strikes?**

Reflections on the hardship and burnout among Chinese animal volunteers and activists

Centre for East Asian Studies

Master's thesis

Author(s):

Lu Niu

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**Author(s):** Lu Niu

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**Supervisor(s):** Lauri Paltemaa

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In recent years, the pet industry in China has been thriving. However, the management and legislation of companion animals are insufficient. The welfare of companion animals is therefore not guaranteed. Many problems derive from the current situation, such as animal abandonment and animal abuse. Grassroots animal organisations, which are operated entirely by individuals, have provided public services concerning companion animals. Their tasks usually include rescuing stray animals, finding adopters and sometimes advocating for companion animal welfare. Many animal volunteers and activists are suffering from burnout. This thesis intends to explore how they describe the causes of their burnout, how their burnout is related to the political and social environment of China and what measures they have taken and what the impacts are.

By adopting the burnout theory and Paul Gorski's categorisation of burnout causes, this thesis conducts expert interviews with six animal volunteers and activists to answer the research questions. The observation from the fieldwork has also been used for analysis.

Through the thematic analysis of the data, this research finds that the external causes, which relate to social environment, have been essential to animal volunteers and activists' burnout. The external causes in this research are concluded as "systemic dysfunction of companion animal management" in China. At the origin, there is no legal framework for companion animal management; In the process of volunteers and activists' practice, they get no support from authorities and limited support from foundations. The insufficient public education on animal protection has also brought obstacles for animal organisations and caused their burnout. The other causes of burnout, including the normalisation of burnout and setting unrealistic goals among volunteers and activists, as well as the potential conflicts inside the organisation, all develop based on the external causes. This research also finds that the ultimate measures taken by volunteers and activists to solve the burnout problem are stopping the acceptance of new animals or quitting the animal charity. These measures explain the high turnover rate of animal volunteers, activists and the unsustainability of animal organisations.

The findings in this research support the view that analysing the current situation of animal welfare and animal cruelty in China should emphasise the political and social factors, instead of solely taking the cultural explanations. Meanwhile, animal organisations need to provide guidance to new volunteers and activists, helping them realise the challenges of their work and set realistic goals.

**Key words:** Companion Animal, Animal Welfare, Volunteer, Activism, Civil Society, China

DeepSeek (version 3.2) was used for proofreading the translation of the ancient Chinese poem.

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## 1 Introduction

Pet, or “宠物” in Chinese, used to be a symbol of extravagant lifestyle and denounced in the Mao era (Li, 2021, p. 99). Now, however, keeping pets has become common in Chinese families. Some pet market reports show that the urbanisation and the change of family structure have accelerated this trend: companion animals have become the family member that provides emotional support (iResearch, 2024; KPMG, 2025).

Chinese pet market started in the 1990s. After the Chinese government lifted the ban on having pet dogs in the early 1990s, the number of companion animals in China began to grow. Since the 2010s, the pet market in China has developed extremely rapidly. The number of pets has reached about 100 million in 2023 (iResearch, 2024; CCTV, 2026). Most of the companion animals are dogs and cats. Many Chinese pet owners take good care of their pets and are willing to spend money on them, which has become the driving force of pet industry (iResearch, 2024; KPMG, 2025; CCTV, 2026). However, not everyone can treat companion animals nicely. It is common to read news about pets being abandoned or even abused. Without relevant legislation, pet breeders and pet owners' behaviour is not regulated. Companion animals' welfare is not guaranteed. The number of stray animals in China, which come from abandoned companion animals, has been millions and the number is still growing (Lin, 2023). The black market of dog and cat meat is also a problem. Besides, the incidents of animal abuse targeted at companion animals have increased dramatically. An underground network of animal abuse has developed (Wright et al., 2025). In this background, many animal lovers in China have established grassroots animal organisations by themselves to help stray animals and sometimes advocate for animal welfare. Their organisations are mostly tolerated by the CCP government since they are delivering public services and haven't been critical of the government. Nevertheless, they still face many limitations and lack of support. The animal organisations that are operated by individual animal lovers have been struggling to survive.

A few existing research have paid attention to animal volunteers and animal activists in these organisations that rescue stray animals and advocate for companion animal welfare. Deborah Cao mentioned the efforts of animal activists and their organisations in her book that covers various kinds of animals and relevant laws in China (Cao, 2015). Peter Li has also introduced some animal protection NGOs in his book about animal welfare in China (Li, 2021). Suzanne Barber analysed how Chinese pet activists advocate for animal rights under the background of

COVID-19 pandemic (Barber, 2022). Jean-Baptiste Pettier has examined the framing and prioritization of pet dogs in animal activists' campaigns (Pettier, 2021). The existing research mainly focuses on the work of these animal organisations, not the volunteers or activists themselves. The wellbeing of animal volunteers and activists have been ignored. Since they have taken the heavy burden resulted from the chaotic companion animal management in China, their wellbeing needs to be considered. Meanwhile, most of the organisations in existing research are relatively famous or large ones. The smaller and less famous organisations face more difficulties and deserve attention. Many animal organisations were closed after struggling for a few years. In fact, these smaller and not-so-famous animal organisations are more common and crucial in the everyday practice of rescuing stray animals. They are more accessible and dispersed across different cities.

### **1.1 Research questions**

When I did my fieldwork and communicated with animal volunteers and activists, I witnessed their difficult situation and their burnout. According to animal volunteers and activists, burnout has been common in this sector. Therefore, based on the existing scholarship of burnout among volunteers and activists, this research intends to explore the burnout among animal volunteers and activists of the grassroots animal organisations in the context of China: how do they describe the causes of their burnout? How is their burnout related to the political and social environment of China? What measures have they taken and what are the impacts?

For the first question, the causes of burnout have been an important part in the existing volunteer/activist burnout research, because the causes can reveal the problems and help the organisations to decide on the relevant measures. The second question emphasises the context of China. The existing burnout research is based on Western liberal democracies while China's civil society faces different challenges. With modifications, burnout theory is used in this study. A comparison of findings between the existing research and this research could reveal the particular situation of animal organisations in China. The third question intends to explore how animal volunteers and activists cope with their burnout. Their burnout and the measures they take have impacts on the animal charity sector. Most of these organisations are based in urban areas, the core area of pet market and related problems. Whereas the situation in the rural area could be more complicated, since dogs and cats might be viewed as guardians or mice catchers, instead of mere companions, for some rural areas' families. Therefore, the focus of this research is on companion animals and animal organisations in urban areas.

To answer the research questions, I have conducted fieldwork by being volunteer in an animal organisation during summer holiday. Meanwhile, I found six animal volunteers and activists from different cities as participants for semi-structured expert interview. My previous personal experience in attending relevant charity events and attention on companion animal management have been helpful in this research.

## **1.2 Researcher positionality**

In the past few years, I have been able to connect with several animal volunteers. One of my friends used to have a small animal organisation. I visited her place once before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, I rescued a kitten with feline infectious peritonitis with my colleague who co-founded a small animal organisation. As a pet owner myself, I have paid attention to news and information about companion animals. I follow many animal organisations' social media accounts and have attended some charity events. The chaotic status quo of companion animal management in China motivates me to conduct this research and try to understand it. My experience might make me sympathise with animal volunteers and activists, which causes bias in this research. To balance this bias, I tried to step back and observe the problems of the everyday practice inside the organisation.

## **1.3 Thesis structure**

The structure of this thesis is as follows: chapter 2 and 3 present the background of this research. Chapter 2 introduces the origin of animal movements from the West, the human-animal relations throughout Chinese history and the current pet market issues in China. Chapter 3 introduces the academic discussion and different models for analysing civil society in China. The regulation of social organisations in Xi Jinping era and animal organisations' current situation is also discussed. Chapter 4 explains the definitions of some terms and the theoretical framework of this thesis. Chapter 5 presents the methodology and fieldwork process for this research. Chapter 6 describes the results and the analysis of data. The concluding chapter 7 discusses the findings of this research and its limitations.

## **2 The origin of animal movements and human-animal relations in China**

The concept of animal rights or animal welfare that animal activists advocate for originates from the West and was introduced to China in the 1990s. However, this does not mean animals were all treated cruelly in Chinese history. The human-animal relations in China have been complicated and affected by cultural, social and political factors. Currently, China has various kinds of problems related to animal welfare and animal cruelty. The academic criticism towards the lack of animal welfare and animal cruelty in China sometimes takes the cultural explanations that focus on the cultural factors. Some scholars disagree with using cultural explanations to analyse contemporary China. They believe cultural explanations have limitations and they emphasise economic and political factors (Nathan, 1988; Seymour, 2005; Li, 2021). This chapter firstly introduces the origin of animal movements briefly, then moves to the human-animal relations in China. Chinese philosophy's idea of animals is presented as a cultural perspective. Marxism's view to animals is included because Marxism has been important for contemporary China. Then, the animals' situation in the daily practice throughout Chinese history is presented, which shows the importance of economic and social factors. Human-animal relations in post-Mao era have also changed along with the political and social changes. At the end of this chapter, the current situation of pet market and associated problems are discussed.

### **2.1 Animal movements in the West**

Animal movements first developed in the 18th century with two branches (Bekoff, 1998, p.1). The first one is the animal welfare movement, which emphasises the humane treatment of animals. It supports using animals for humans as long as animals do not endure unnecessary pain (Bekoff, 1998, p. 42). Currently, there is no strict definition concerning animal welfare, since it varies in different regions (Abubakar, 2018, p. 3). The concept of five freedoms is used widely to define animal welfare: “free from hunger and thirst, free from discomfort, freedom from pain and disease, freedom from fear and distress, free to express normal behaviour” (Abubakar, 2018, p. 3).

The second branch is the animal rights movement. It is about completely ending “human use and abuse of animals” (Silverstein, 1996, p. 30). Animal rights theory has two foundations. The first one is the natural rights theory, and the second one is utilitarianism (Donovan, 1990,

p. 353). Tom Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* represents the natural rights theory. He argues that animals have the natural rights just like humans. Any exploitation of animals should be abolished. The utilitarianism approach was developed when Peter Singer published the book *Animal Liberation* in 1975. This book has become a landmark for the animal rights movement (Weisskircher, 2024, p. 333). Singer insists that animals have the same rights as humans, but unlike Regan's zero-tolerance toward suffering, he believes that the suffering of humans and animals can be "equally tolerated" if it has the necessary reasons (Silverstein, 1996, p. 28). It should be noted that Singer puts animals and humans at equal status while animal welfare emphasises using animals for human's interests. Based on Singer's theory, using animals for farming and experiments cannot be justified without strong reasons.

## 2.2 Human-animal relations in China

Although the terms for animal movements in the West have theoretical differences, they are often used interchangeably in China. The "nuanced differences" between these theories are difficult to grasp because they originated from Western countries and were introduced to China in the 1990s (Lu, 2013, p. 351). The concept of animal welfare was first introduced to China in 1989 through a training course from American veterinarians. The course was organised by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture (Carpenter, 2016, p. 382). The animal rights theory was known to Chinese people after Peter Singer's book was translated and published in Taiwan in the 1990s. The Chinese scholar Tongjin Yang explained this theory in the article "The Animal Rights Theory and the Eco-centric Arguments" (Lu, 2013, p. 351). Meanwhile, animal protection is a term used quite often in Chinese legislation with natural resource management as the basis (Carpenter, 2016, p.381). According to Carpenter (2016), it is "a product of human action" instead of animal welfare's emphasis on the "physical and physiological state of animals". The idea of guaranteeing the welfare of animals was known by some ordinary citizens in the 2000s (Carpenter, 2016, p. 381).

Currently, China has various kinds of problems related to animal welfare and animal cruelty. China is graded "D" by Voiceless Animal Cruelty Index because the factory farming is increasing and there is no relevant animal legislation in China at all (Voiceless, n.d.). Meanwhile, although the authorities of some provinces have banned the consumption of animals outside the National Catalogue of Livestock and Poultry Genetic Resources (国家畜禽遗传资源目录), including cats, dogs and wildlife animals, the smuggling trucks and black market of these animals still exist (China Development Brief, 2020a). There are no national

actions to tackle the problem. Another increasingly serious problem of animal cruelty in China is the intentional torture to companion animals, especially cats. According to animal activists from Feline Guardian (Wright et al., 2025), an international NGO, China has been the base for the international underground network of cat torture videos. Animal abusers sell these videos to make profits. From 2024 to 2025, the cat torture videos in Chinese Telegram groups have increased by 500% (Wright et al., 2025). Since China does not have legislation against animal cruelty, animal abusers do not get any serious punishment once they get caught.

The academic criticism towards the lack of animal welfare and the animal cruelty in China is sometimes expanded to the criticism of Chinese culture. According to the cultural explanations, violence, embedded in Chinese culture, is frequently used not just against animals, but also against Chinese people (Li, 2021, p. 73). Jonathan Spence (2013) explored the change of the Ming and Qing dynasties, a period of time full of violence, repression and the strong conquering the weak, which is related to the governing method of the contemporary Chinese Communist Party regime. According to Spence's arguments, developing a compassionate national character is difficult under such circumstances (Spence, 2013). Barend J. ter Haar (2000) also used culture as the explanation for violence in China. This cultural explanation for the cruelty in China is questioned by other scholars. Andrew Nathan (1998) believes that the cultural explanations reinforce a national stereotype instead of analysing the real situation. Peter J Li (2021) points out that there are many limitations of using Chinese culture to explain animal cruelty. He criticises that cultural explanations divert people's attention from "more direct contributing factors" of the problems in contemporary China (Li, 2021, p. 46). James D. Seymour puts it more directly: "contemporary Chinese attitudes have been influenced primarily by economic or political factors rather than cultural considerations" (Seymour, 2005, p. 249). Cultural explanations might actually impede investigating the practical situation in China. Besides, it is inappropriate to generalise that all Chinese people are ignorant about animals' welfare, as Deborah Cao observed that the animal protection movement is currently emerging in China (Cao, 2015, p. 4). The battle between animal abusers and animal lovers is also going on.

### 2.2.1 Animals in Chinese philosophy and Marxism

Chinese traditional culture is not a culture of cruelty. On the contrary, it has shown compassion towards animals. In Chinese high philosophy, animals have equal status as

humans in nature (Ye, 2018). Luofu Ye (2018) examined the different statuses of animals in the biblical narratives and Chinese classical texts. Based on historian Lynn White, Jr.'s works, Ye's argument is that Judeo-Christian beliefs put humans in a dominant position over nature. God planned things for humans' benefits. Humans are therefore superior to animals, whereas Chinese classical texts regard humans and animals as equal (Ye, 2018, p. 825). Cheng Chung-ying's opinion about Western and Chinese philosophy corresponds to Ye's argument. Cheng (1986) said that Western philosophy separates human and nonhuman worlds. "Reason or rationality" is the character of humans. Therefore, humans have the "moral status" that animals do not have. In contrast, Chinese Confucianism and Daoism have "an internalistic point of view on the environment and nature" (Cheng, 1986, p. 159). Humans are the "consummator" of the nature, not the "conqueror" (Cheng, 1986, p. 160). Nature or "naturalness" is more important than reason or rationality (Cheng, 1991, p. 12). Animals' intrinsic values are recognised in traditional Chinese philosophy.

The folk Daoism, which is more comprehensive than Daoist classical texts to the general public, condemns exploiting animals (Li, 2021, p. 67). Daoists prohibit actions such as "kicking and whipping farm animals, capturing hibernating animals during winter, destroying nests, harvesting eggs, and harassing or terrorising animals" (Sun et al., 2009, pp. 182–184). Confucianists, who are more pragmatic than Daoists, also promote using natural resources in a limited way. For example, they reject catching young fish and shooting birds that are nesting (Mang, 2009, p. 3).

Buddhist belief that humans and nature are "an integrated whole inseparable from each other" is similar to that of Daoism (Li, 2021, p. 76). Buddhism prohibits killing. For Buddhist believers, killing is a serious sin and they should not get involved in businesses like "animal slaughter" (de Silva, 2005). Since Buddhism has the concept of karma, it encourages people to do good things. Lin Yutang (1936) believes that Buddhism brings peace. According to Buddhist law of karma, animal cruelty could cause misfortune. Buddhism also taught Chinese people that butchery is an "inhuman act" (Lin, 1936, p. 120).

Marxism is an important thought that affects China since the establishment of People's Republic of China. Ted Benton is a crucial figure concerning Marx's view towards animals. He built "bridges" between Marxists and ecologists (Stache, 2018). In Benton's opinion, Marx distinguishes humans from animals. Human activities are "free" and "conscious" (Benton, 1988, p. 6). The labour for basic needs, such as eating, drinking and procreation, are

“animal functions” and animals are driven by these basic physical needs (Martindale, 2025, p. 3). Marx uses this distinction between humans and animals to criticise how capitalism reduces humans to animals and losing human potential (Benton, 1988). According to Benton (1988), Marx believes that animals are inferior to humans, which is refuted by some other scholars who study Marxism. Lawrence Wilde (2000) thinks that Marx’s discussion of the difference between humans and animals does not contain any prejudice against animals. Marx’s humanism emphasises “harmony between humanity and nature”. This “nature” includes both humans and animals (Wilde, 2000, p. 13). Dayton Martindale shares the similar view to Wilde’s and proposes that “Marx’s vision of emancipation under communism can and should be extended to other species” (Martindale, 2025).

However, it should be noted that the everyday practice of how humans treat animals in China has not strictly followed the doctrine of Marxism or other philosophies and traditions. As Deborah Cao has stated, Chinese treatment of animals is not the same as how Chinese philosophy concerns animals (Cao, 2011, p. 353). Peter Li holds the similar opinion and agrees with James. D. Seymour’s idea that economic and political factors are more significant than cultural factors (Li, 2021, p. 46). This kind of opinion can be approved by examining the human-animal relations in real life of Chinese history.

### 2.2.2 Animals in daily practice

In Chinese history, animals have played important roles in many aspects, such as “husbandry, hunting, transport, human consumption and healing” (Cao, 2015, p. 18). Roel Sterckx (2002) believes that animal management has been under the governance of the government since Zhou dynasty. Officials were in charge of “herding cattle, training horses and supervising dogs” (Sterckx, 2002, p. 46). Nevertheless, the management of animals, according to Sterckx, became important only when they could affect “the human realm”. Animals belong to the “social and ritual categories” that “shaped human society” (Sterckx, 2002, p. 48). Therefore, humans are not treating animals based on philosophical doctrines. Instead, animals are regarded as resources that can be used and managed by humans. As Deborah Cao (2015) has pointed out, animals’ instrumental value, which is their value to serve humans, has been recognised. Animals’ intrinsic value, which refers to “something good or desirable in itself”, has not been important for animal management throughout Chinese history (Cao, 2015, p. 17).

The compassion to animals in Chinese traditional culture and the practical use of animals in daily life could show how economic and political factors are more important than cultural factors in human-animal relations of daily life. However, it is inappropriate to reckon that all Chinese people treat animals as mere resources or instruments, so that they do not enjoy animals as companions and do not care about animals' wellbeing.

In Chinese history, some small animals, such as cats, dogs and birds, have been domesticated. Chinese people have a tradition of keeping birds as pets. Cats and dogs' roles were between companions and helpers for humans. For example, Lu You (陆游), the famous poet in the Song dynasty of ancient China, once wrote about using salt to exchange for a cat to catch mice in his study room:

裹盐迎得小狸奴，尽护山房万卷书。

惭愧家贫策勋薄，寒无毡坐食无鱼。

(Translation: I used salt to exchange for a cat who can guard ten thousand books in my study room. I am ashamed that my meagre home cannot reward my cat: it does not have a mat to sit and fish to eat.)

For him, cat is a helper in the family, not a mere companion, but he feels ashamed that his room is shabby and cannot provide his cat with a good environment and good food. He cares about the wellbeing of his cat.

Sometimes cats and dogs might be kept as just companions, especially in the emperor's palace. For instance, the Pekingese dog was the royal breed that was kept as companion in court. Yong Zheng Emperor of the Qing dynasty, was a dog lover and kept many pet dogs (Ge & Xu, 2009). During the Republican period, Chiang Kai-shek was seen with his dog in some pictures (Li, 2021, p. 114).

There were also efforts for animal welfare from a legislative perspective and social movements. During the late Qing period, China experienced huge economic and social transformations. The foreign establishments had extraterritoriality and foreign residents managed their own affairs. Some European and North American governments' practices were brought into China, including the regulations to prevent cruelty to animals (Wasserstrom, 2022, p. 80). Mark Swislocki (2012) examined animal cruelty court cases in Shanghai's international settlement in the late Qing period. Swislocki (2012) found that, on the one hand, there are differences between Chinese interpretations of animal protection and that of the Anglo-US. The Anglo-US concept is to protect animals and punish criminals through law,

whereas the Chinese concept is based on “a system of cosmic justice” (Swislocki, 2012, p. 1161). On the other hand, there was actually more agreement than disagreement about animal protection in practice. However, the courts were usually turned into a “spectacle of Sino-foreign cultural difference” in popular representation (Swislocki, 2012, p. 1161). Swislocki’s findings illustrate that, although animals were regarded as resources for humans’ benefits, animal cruelty was morally condemned in China.

In the 1930s, Chinese Buddhist activists initiated an animal protection movement. According to Matthias Schumann’s article “For the Sake of Morality and Civilization: The Buddhist Animal Protection Movement in Republican China”, the Buddhist believers thought the 1930s saw a decline in morality because of the wars and disasters (Schumann, 2021, p. 23).

Buddhist activists promoted the protection of animals with the hope of reconstructing human morality. They argued that animal cruelty would bring “bad karma” and make people ruthless (Schumann, 2021, p. 23). In 1928, writer Lu Bicheng proposed establishing organisations and preventing animal cruelty (Li, 2021, p. 93). Her proposal was realised later as China Society for the Protection of Animals (中国保护动物协会) was established. This is the first organisation in China specifically for animal protection (Schumann, 2021, p. 39). Meanwhile, Chiang Kai-shek’s Nanjing government started the New Life Movement, which aimed to “enforce social cohesion and national unity” (Wasserstrom, 2022, p. 163). The prevention of cruelty to animals was included in this movement: “horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, chicken and ducks” were all included for the protection against cruelty. The “Jiangsu Provincial Tentative Rules Prohibiting the Transport and Slaughter of Draught Cattle” was published during this period (Li, 2021, p. 93). However, many Chinese people were still struggling with having enough food to eat and survive at that time. It was difficult to promote the New Life Movement. All the efforts for animal protection were stopped after Japan started the full-scale invasion of China.

After establishing the People’s Republic of China, Chinese Communist Party promoted qualities such as “work hard and resist extravagance” and “learn from the workers and peasants”. Many people related “resist extravagance” to not pursuing “non-essential items”, including pets. As a result, keeping pets became “bourgeois practice”. (Li, 2021, p. 99). The *New York Times* reporter once wrote about CCP banning pets because it is “a symbol of decadence” (Shenon, 1994). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that no solid sources have been found that support the claim that the CCP banned pet keeping as a bourgeois lifestyle. Elaine Jeffrey searched in the *People’s Daily* database between 1949 and 2019 and found

only one article about pet owners in Britain. There is no ban on keeping pets according to this state media (Jeffrey, 2020, p. 514). Jeffrey also found that the ban on pets due to ideology came from the notice of a Red Guard faction in Beijing (Jeffrey, 2020, p. 515). Before the Cultural Revolution, Beijing government concerned more about the public health issues related to animals, such as rabies from dogs, than the ideological issues of pets. The dog culls began with the Patriotic Health Campaign in 1952 (Jeffrey 2020, 517). Besides, in 1958, Mao ordered killing sparrows because they consumed grains (Li, 2021, p. 101). However, the dog culls is never an effective way of preventing rabies. China still has the world's second-highest rate of rabies cases (Barber, 2022, p. 72). WHO has also declared that there is a lack of evidence to support dog culls for stopping rabies or controlling the dog population (Barber, 2022, p. 72). Meanwhile, killing sparrows not only failed to prevent, but also worsened the Great Famine between 1959 and 1961 since insects increased without sparrows (Li, 2021, p. 101). During this period, people ate whatever they could find to survive. Many animals, which were not normal food choices, were hunted and eaten by people. Animal welfare was ignored under such circumstances.

### 2.2.3 Human-animal relations in post-Mao era

According to Kege Li (2024), China is usually criticised for its animal-related legislation. First, there are few animal welfare laws, and these laws concern the value of animals to humans instead of caring for animals themselves. Second, the existing laws only protect certain types of animals that have “economic or scientific value” (Li, 2024, p. 46). In addition, the implementation of animal laws is sometimes inadequate. For example, some wildlife animals were still killed for trade after the Wildlife Protection Law was published in 1988. The revised Wildlife Protection Law that came into effect in 2017 did not solve all these problems related to wildlife protection (Li, 2021, pp. 217-266). Working animals, including farm animals and laboratory animals, are even less guaranteed welfare compared to wildlife animals. According to Deborah Cao (2015), there are very few reports and public information about the actual situation and the violation of laboratory animals' law and regulations. It is doubtful if these laws and regulations have been strictly complied with (Cao, 2015, pp. 131-132). The welfare of farm animals is more complicated because it is related to food security and economy, which are important for the Party's legitimacy (Li, 2021, pp. 179-215).

As for companion animals, many Chinese people are familiar with the term “pet” or “宠物”. This term was not in the Chinese dictionary until the late 1980s (Cao, 2015, p. 101), the time

that the number of pets began to increase. For most Chinese families, having cats and dogs as mere companions, instead of helpers in the family to catch mice or guard house, is a recent trend (Cao, 2015, p.102). In the early 1980s, dog ownership was banned. The reason behind this ban is the increasing number of rabies cases in China: there were around 7000 human deaths caused by rabies in 1981. The number tripled compared to that of the year 1956 (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 518). Banning dogs to control rabies, however, turned out to be time-consuming, not effective and even resisted by residents. Through the documents of the year 1983 from Beijing Chongwen district's government, Elaine Jeffreys (2020) found an interesting thing: some residents were recruited into the dog-catching teams. They were supposed to kill these dogs. However, more than half of the dogs were "relocated" instead of killed (Jeffreys, 2020, p. 519). Many residents were not willing to kill dogs and might plan to openly have them once the ban was lifted. Other documents also show that the dog ban was actually disobeyed in Beijing (Beijing Local Records, 2003). Even the *People's Daily* reported the growth of pet services in the early 1990s (Lai, 1994). Therefore, the dog ban was officially lifted in 1995. The pet industry began to thrive.

#### 2.2.4 The booming pet market and associated issues

According to pet industry reports, the scale of the pet industry in China has increased steadily in recent years and most of the companion animals in China are dogs and cats. In 2023, the number of companion animals in China was around 100 million (21 Jingji net, 2024; iResearch, 2024; KPMG, 2025). However, there is no national law that recognises their legal status as companion animals (Carpenter, 2016; Cao, 2015). Currently, pets are regarded as their owners' properties, just like other commodities without value of life (Carpenter, 2016, p. 381). On the one hand, there is the lack of relevant law and regulations; on the other hand, pet industry is experiencing an explosive growth. As a result, many problems related to pets have been increasingly prominent in recent years. First, the pet owners' and pet breeders' behavior are not regulated. Some pet breeders keep pets in poor condition to reduce the cost and abandon them once they get sick. There are terms like "backyard cat" (后院猫) or "weekly cat", "weekly dog" (星期猫, 星期狗) that describe those pets bred in poor environment and die after being bought home in weeks (Jiemian news, 2022). Pet owners can also abandon their pets without any punishment. Meanwhile, the relevant public education is insufficient. Some pet owners are criticised for "uncivilised behavior" (不文明行为), such as not picking up dog poo when they walk their dogs, which reinforces some people's prejudice against pet

owners and intensifies their hate towards pets and pet owners. The public education about animal welfare is also absent. Many Chinese cities have implemented regulations for dog ownership, such as dog registration and ban on certain breeds. However, the enforcement of these regulations is inadequate. Kege Li (2023) believes that the dog management campaigns (dog culls) initiated by local governments are the remedies for the failure of regulations. These campaigns are more “coercive” and “intensive” compared to normal law enforcement (Li, 2023, p. 75). Registered pets’ safety is not always guaranteed during these campaigns, which discourages pet owners from paying the registration fee (Li, 2023, p. 90). Many scandals happened in these campaigns. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some pets were killed at their homes when their owners were sent into quarantine (Phoebe, 2021).

The inadequate enforcement of regulations and the brutal campaigns pose the question that if someday companion animals are legally recognised, will the law be enforced effectively? This question is also important for another problem related to companion animals: animal abuse. Animal cruelty is not a peculiar problem for companion animals. Farm animals, for example, face the same problem (Economist, 2023). Nevertheless, the cruelty towards companion animals is often intentionally malicious abuse and a related underground network has developed. The animal abusers often choose stray animals because they are not the “property” of anyone, so they are not protected by any law. Sometimes they also pretend to be adopters. Once they adopt an animal successfully, they will torture it because the animal becomes abuser’s property. There is an underground network of animal abusers that they sell animal cruelty videos to earn money (Li, M., 2020; Wright et al., 2025). There is no animal protection law that could punish animal cruelty. However, Professor Ye Qianfang from the law school of Zhongnan University of Economics and Law explains that although there is no law to protect companion animals, animal abusers can be punished according to some other laws such as “Law of the People's Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security” and “Animal Epidemic Prevention Law of the People's Republic of China” (Li, X., 2023). The problem is that law enforcement is not effective.

The inadequate law enforcement is not limited to pet registration and animal abuse, but also other sectors, such as illegal dog meat market. Peter J. Li (2021) has conducted an in-depth research about dog meat market and provides some explanations for the inadequate law enforcement. These explanations could also be applied to the pet market. Dog meat consumption in China is frequently criticised, not only because dog is usually regarded as the companion animal, but also due to the relevant black market. Dog meat is actually not a

mainstream food for most Chinese people. It is a “subculture” in China (Li, 2021, p. 115). The local government of some less developed provinces once encouraged dog meat consumption as local culture because they felt pressured to “catch up” with the more “developed” provinces and dog meat industry might be an engine for the economic growth. The famous “Yulin dog meat festival” is the result of local government’s encouragement. (Li, 2021, pp. 126-129). Nevertheless, the dog meat industry just accounts for a very small part of the local economy. Meanwhile, the relevant black market becomes a serious problem. Farming meat dogs is more difficult than farming common livestock and costs a lot of money. Therefore, stealing dogs becomes an important source of dog meat (Luan & Yuan, 2016; Li, 2015). The dog thieves usually target stray dogs and pet dogs that have not registered and microchipped. Sometimes they poison these dogs in order to catch them easily. The food safety of these dogs’ meat cannot be guaranteed. Cats are sometimes also the target of these thieves. It has become animal activists’ task to detect and report to the police about the smuggling trucks that transport stolen dogs and cats (Barber, 2022; Xu, 2023).

Since the dog meat trade cannot contribute a lot to the economy and causes many problems, why does the local government not take harsh measures to ban the dog meat trade for good? By interviewing two government officials, Peter J. Li (2021) talks about this issue in his research: the government officials agree that dog meat trade cannot contribute a lot to local economy or employment. Eating dog meat is not the mainstream. Instead, it is a “subculture” with “no future”. However, this trade has employed “some of the least skilled and most disadvantaged workers”. They might be peasants who lost their lands and were laid off workers. They do not have skills for other professions (Li, 2021, pp. 145-147). Stable employment and poverty reduction are primary goals for local governments of these less developed provinces. If dog meat trade is banned, these workers will lose their livelihood, which might cause political unrest. As for food safety, it has always been a problem in China. The food safety of dog meat only affects a small number of people. The local government chooses to pay more attention on the safety of other common foods than dog meat (Li, 2021, pp. 138-139).

These explanations help shed light on examining the unregulated pet industry. One of the participants in my research also supports this view. When Peter J. Li conducted field work for his research in 2014, he found that many meat dog breeders abandoned selling meat dogs and turned to raising pet dogs. The reason for this trend is that pet dogs can be sold at high prices. The pet business is more profitable than the meat dog business (Li, 2021, p. 130). Now a

decade has passed, the scale of pet industry is much bigger than that of 2014. Meanwhile, reducing unemployment and promoting economic growth are still the priorities of local governments compared to animal welfare. Government officials are less motivated to regulate pet breeders' and pet owners' misconduct. They are also not motivated to publish a comprehensive animal welfare legislation because it might affect farm animals, food security and the food prices. All these factors are important for social stability (Economist, 2023).

Yet this doesn't mean there's no hope for promoting animal welfare in China. With the efforts of animal activists and pet owners who care for animal welfare, some progress has been made. In December 2025, a man who poisoned nine pet dogs to death was sentenced four years in jail, although the main reason for the sentence is that the poison is also harmful to humans. If he used poisons that are only harmful to dogs, he would not receive such sentence (China News Asia, n.d.). However, this is the first time that someone is sentenced for poisoning pets in China. The trial of this case has lasted for three years. One of the owners of the poisoned dogs has quit her job and devoted herself to this case. She has now become an icon of animal welfare in China (Ifeng News, 2025). As Deborah Cao (2015) has stated, it's wrong to assume that "all Chinese are cruel or oblivious to animal suffering" (Cao, 2015, p. 4). Animal activists and volunteers have already been an indispensable part of civil society in China.

### 3 Civil society and animal organisations in China

This chapter first presents the academic discussion of whether China has a civil society, and then talks about the various kinds of models that proposed by scholars to analyse Chinese civil society. In the next part, the focus is on the tightening grip on civil society in the Xi Jinping era, especially after the enforcement of Charity Law and Overseas NGO Law. At the end of this chapter, there is an overview of the history and current situation about animal organisations, especially those that rescue stray animals and advocate for companion animal welfare.

#### 3.1 Civil society in China?

When talking about civil society in China, many scholars doubt if there is civil society in China at all. Some of them raise their doubts from a cultural perspective: Confucianism has influenced China deeply. Confucianism, however, does not have the Western concept of “civil society” (Madsen, 2010; Shils, 1996; Strand, 1990, p.2). Meanwhile, Confucianism affects the relation between the state and society in China. The officials act as the “parent” while citizens are like “children”. Children should obey their parents due to filial piety and hierarchical order (Qiaoan, 2021, pp. 19-20). Civil society, therefore, cannot take root in China. These arguments are refuted by other scholars. Timothy Brook (2014) points out that China “has a tradition of social organisations independent of the state” (Brook, 2014, p. 2). The auto-organisations, which do not belong to the state administrative structure and do not pay taxes, have always existed in Chinese history. Brook takes the various kinds of auto-organisations in Shanghai since the 17th century as the example. During the Republican period, these auto-organisations were recognised by the Nationalist government. Their existence proves that China has something similar to civil society (Brook, 2014, pp. 22-35). Some other scholars also believe that the Republican era had the public sphere that is important for civil society. By examining the local communities in Hankou, Strand (1990) claims that the late imperial China had the public spaces for political discussion, such as teahouses and universities. Individuals joined “self-regulating corporate groups” and spoke out, which can be characterised as a “premodern civil society” (Strand, 1990). Although these auto-organisations and groups are not confrontational to the state as in liberal democracy, they formed the public sphere in China and resemble the civil society.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the discussion of civil society in China takes another form. During the totalitarian Mao era, the state "penetrated into every corner of society" (Sun, 2017, p. 306), thus the society was atomised and no independent collective organisations existed at all. This situation changed during the Reform and Opening-up period. Social organisations were allowed to develop. Nonetheless, some types of social organisations are allowed while other types are prohibited. The existing social organisations can not criticise the government and fail to form a civil society based on normative liberal understanding.

Local government welcomes those social organisations that can relieve their social service burden. After the Reform and Opening-up, the collectivisation of Mao era ended. The fiscal policy was decentralised and local government gained both freedom and the social service burden (Qiaoan, 2021, pp. 22-23). The newly developed social organisations help the local government to provide social services. Under this background, the classical civil theory model is not appropriate to analyse the situation in China. There are several models to explain the relations between the state and social organisations in China. One is the corporatist theory, which is usually used to explain GONGOs, such as the Red Cross Society in China. Corporatism regards organisations as supervised and controlled by the state and denies any agency to social organisations in China (Unger & Chan, 1995). Some other models take the organisational perspective and emphasise the interdependence of social organisations and the state agencies under consultative authoritarianism. Organisations play an important role in giving feedback to the state. Meanwhile, social organisations make efforts to be the alliances of the state to get legitimacy and resources. Compared to the corporatist model, these models recognise the operational autonomy of social organisations (Hsu, 2010; Teets, 2013). Moreover, Christopher Nevitt (1996) suggested the institutional model that includes cadres' personal benefits into the prospects of social organisations. Organisations that bring personal benefits to cadres will be supported, otherwise they might be ignored or suppressed. Kang Xiaoguang and Han Heng (2008) proposed the "graduated control" model: they make organisations into several categories. Those that provide public services are supported, whereas those that challenge the state are suppressed. Furthermore, Sun Taiyi (2017) proposed four categories of state and social organisations' relations in China: complementary, cooperative, competitive and confrontational, which depend on the goals of the social organisations and the state's efficiency in delivering certain public services. The categorisation is not static and changes according to the state and social organisations'

interaction (Sun, 2017). The Charity Law, which was published in 2016, proves that analysing social organisations as different categories is more appropriate than treating all social organisations as whole.

### 3.2 The regulation of social organisations in the Xi Jinping era

The exact number of social organisations in China is difficult to calculate. Although the number of registered organisations is 892,000 in 2022, the unregistered organisations could be 3-20 million (Xinhua News, 2023). According to the Charity Law, the social organisations in China can be divided into: foundations (基金会), social groups (社会团体) and private non-enterprise units or social service organisations (民办非企业单位 或 社会服务机构). Among all these organisations, only a small number of them are doing charity work and could be called NGOs (Corsetti, 2019; China Development Brief, 2020b; Gridsum, 2018). In fact, the names for NGOs in China have many variants. Yu Keping (2010) specified more than ten kinds of names other than NGO or NPO, such as *minjian* organisations (民间组织) and *qunzhong/renming tuanti* (群众/人民团体). Currently, there is no official definition of grassroots NGOs in China. Ji Min and Hua Pang (2021) proposed that this term could refer to the social organisations that have not registered at the Ministry of Civil Affairs in China.

In the Xi Jinping era, the regulation of social organisations and civil society has turned out to be conservative and the “decision-making power” of the party is emphasised inside social organisations (Sidel, 2025, p. 541; Lam, 2019, p. 10). China’s first Charity Law and the Overseas NGO Law were passed in 2016. Many scholars believe these two laws have put more restrictions on Chinese NGOs and restricted funding from overseas donors (Spires, 2020; Sidel, 2025; Martinez, 2022, 691; Feng, 2017). The amendments to Charity Law, which were released in 2023, strengthen the CCP leadership as well as the control and supervision over charitable work (Sidel, 2025).

The grassroots NGOs are more vulnerable than other types of social organisations after the implementation of the Charity Law and the Overseas NGO Law. Although the Charity Law does not require NGOs to find a supervisory agency anymore, the registration to Ministry of Civil Affairs is still difficult for grassroots NGOs. They might be rejected as long as the local government officials feel their existence is “sensitive” (Spires, 2020, p. 577). Some grassroots NGOs, therefore, choose to register as businesses instead of charities. Others might work without any legal status (Spires, 2020, p. 575). Some grassroots NGO leaders are also

unsatisfied that the newly published law uses “charity” to encapsulate their work in the NGO. The word “charity” narrows their function as mere public service providers and excludes their function of advocating for public interest (Spires, 2020).

Grassroots NGOs’ difficulty in fundraising is one of the most serious implications of the Charity Law. The Charity Law limits the fundraising to a few charities that have the public fundraising credentials from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (The State Council, 2016). online crowdfunding also requires the platform to get approval from provincial-level authorities (Sidel, 2025, p. 6). Bertram Lang (2024) has researched digital philanthropy in China and believes that the limit of online fundraising and online donations is a way to prevent online fraud. However, the limitation has also made big technology companies dominate online crowdfunding systems in China because they can get credentials from the government. Grassroots organisations have to depend on these tech companies’ platforms to accept donations (Lang, 2024, pp. 224-231). Song Qi’s research (2023) about the platformization of digital philanthropy in China found that half of the organisations that get online fundraising credentials are private internet technology companies (Song, 2023, p. 128). Zheng Wenjuan (2023) reveals that the dominant role of tech companies has changed the model of fundraising. Since the platforms of big tech companies have the power to select and govern participants in online fundraising, they sometimes exploit the labour of grassroots NGOs (Zheng, 2023, p. 1899).

Additionally, the Overseas NGO Law has restricted domestic NGOs from getting funding from overseas donors. The collaboration with international organisations is also difficult. This law is regarded as the state control of international NGOs (Martinez, 2022, p. 691; Feng, 2017). As a result, many grassroots NGOs turn to domestic grant-making foundations, but the funding from foundations is not reliable either. Ji Min’s research (2021) demonstrates that Chinese foundations seldom include grassroots NGOs in the funding scheme. Foundations and grassroots NGOs have different views towards each other. Grassroots NGOs expect foundations to support their projects, while foundations want NGOs to improve infrastructure before applying for funding. However, without the funding, grassroots NGOs found it difficult to conduct any projects and make improvements (Ji, 2021). Meanwhile, Lai’s study (2015) about the relation between the state and foundations shows that foundations tend to fund public sectors that are directed by the government instead of funding grassroots NGOs. This is due to the concern of political safety. Domestic foundations have also led a top-down marketisation trend of fundraising in China. Many business entrepreneurs get involved in

fundraising with foundations (Huang, 2022). By interviewing some grassroots NGOs' leaders, Lai (2021) finds that business entrepreneurs' involvement could drift a grassroots NGO's missions and goals, a problem that has already made some NGO leaders worry about.

### 3.3 Animal organisations in China

The animal protection groups were often included in environmental NGOs and appeared in China in the 1990s (Li, 2021, p. 270). Back then, most of the rescue operations were for wildlife animals. Sometimes they also protested against the farms that have treated farm animals harshly, such as the notorious bear farms (Cao, 2015, p. 157). In 1992, China Small Animal Protection Association was established by Lu Di in Beijing. It is usually regarded as the first registered companion animal organisation in China. With the lifting of the ban on keeping pet dogs and the increasing middle class in China, the social organisations for companion animals developed rapidly since the 2000s (Barber, 2022, p. 73). Their tasks include rescuing companion animals that are abandoned or trapped on smuggling trucks, providing shelters for these animals and sometimes speaking out for policy advocacy, such as promoting animal protection law (Cao, 2015; Li, 2021; Barber, 2022). After the rise of social media, animal organisations are able to receive rescue information online. For example, if someone comes across an injured cat or dog in the city and is unable to help. They could take a photo and send a message to the local animal organisation's social media account (Cao, 2015). Social media is also a platform that animal organisations display their daily work and financial details, which becomes a channel for the organisation's "accountability" and attracting donations (Cao, 2015, p. 166).

The forms of companion animal social organisations are diverse. For example, Ta Foundation (它基金) is a Chinese domestic foundation that focuses on companion animals. It was registered in Beijing in 2011 (Ta foundation, n.d.). There are also some animal organisations that are based in certain areas or institutes, such as universities or residential complexes (居民小区). They are a special type that comprises specific groups as members, like students and local residents. They only function in certain limited areas, such as campuses and local community. Other than these, most of the animal organisations in China are social groups or private units operated by individuals. Some have successfully registered at the Ministry of Civil Affairs and could be called "NGO". However, getting the registration is never an easy task. Even the China Small Animal Protection Association used their connections with senior government officials to get the registration accepted (Li, 2021, p. 282). According to Cao

(2015), most of these animal organisations are not registered and the total number of animal organisations could be more than 10 000. Since the scale of pet market has increased rapidly these years, the current number of animal organisations might be higher than this data from Cao a decade ago. The organisations that cannot get registered have to seek other options. Registered as the business enterprise is an easier way to get a legal status. The emerging online shopping platforms enable animal organisations to open online stores and sell small handmade products or act as the marketing outlet for famous pet product brands, so that they can get revenue for rescuing animals. Currently, there are a few animal organisations that have been famous in online businesses. One of the most famous ones is Qiuqiu Manor (糶糶庄园) in Jiangsu province. They have even developed their pet food brand “Qiuqiu”. With affordable prices and a special design for stray animals, many animal organisations buy pet food from Qiuqiu for their own shelters. There are some other organisations that have transformed their rescue shelters into commercial spaces, such as cat cafes (Beijing Youth Daily, 2025). In this way, they could reduce the cost of renting a space as animal shelter. This marketisation trend of animal organisations could relieve their financial burden, but the sustainability of this model is yet to be known. Many organisations are still looking for donations and crowdfunding. Even Qiuqiu Manor is constantly under financial pressure (Du, 2025). The revenue from businesses could not cover their expense. Meanwhile, since they are involved in businesses, it is hard to define them: they are in between grassroots NGOs and small businesses. Zeng Xiangbing, the founder of the Environmental Public Interest Lawyers Group, once criticised that many grassroots NGOs and social organisations lack professionalism. The founding members exhaust their own money and time to solve the organisation’s problems instead of operating in a professional way (China News, 2015). The current marketisation trend might solve some of their financial problems instead of exhausting founders’ money, but the accountability of organisations is sometimes questioned. There have been comments on social media that doubt whether these organisations are charities or small businesses.

In addition to financial difficulties, many animal organisations face numerous other types of pressure. Although the animal organisations are providing the public services of urban stray animal management that local governments are not efficient at, the officials are wary of animal organisations. Some organisations have been warned not to hold public activities to promote animal rights (Lam, 2019, p. 16). Willy Wo-Lap Lam (2019) believes that the Chinese government is afraid of the network among these organisations that could mobilise

perhaps thousands of people in very short time. Besides, the animal organisations are sometimes even criticised as agents of Western forces that aim to overthrow the CCP regime, because the animal rights movement comes from the West (Li, 2021, p. 144). Peter J Li (2021) found that this narrative has been adopted by dog meat traders to defend their business. The confrontation between dog meat traders and animal activists is framed as the battle between nationalism and Western forces (Li, 2021, p. 142). The animal abusers have also used this narrative to criticise animal activists and divert people's attention from animal abuse. In addition to these pressures, the idea of providing shelters for stray dogs and cats is still not understood by some Chinese people. It is easy to find comments on social media that question why animal activists treat animals better than humans.

These grassroots animal organisations in China have not received support from authorities while they are delivering the public services related to companion animals. Meanwhile, the limitation on civil society also affects animal organisations. Their financial sources and methods for advocacy are limited. The social environment has not been supportive either. The black meat market and animal abuse have been the counterforce to animal organisations' efforts. Public awareness of companion animal welfare is insufficient and produces obstacles for animal organisations' work.

## 4 Definitions and theoretical framework

This chapter intends to, firstly, discuss the ambiguity of defining the terms that refer to the animal organisations and participants of this research. Secondly, since this research intends to explore the burnout among Chinese animal volunteers and activists, I have adopted the volunteer/activist burnout theory, especially Paul Gorski's categorisation of burnout causes, as my theoretical framework. However, it should be noted that both the definitions of activists and the burnout theory derive from the context of Western liberal democracies. The characteristics of civil society in China are considered in this research.

### 4.1 Defining “animal organisation” and “activist”

According to Ji Min and Hua Pang (2021), the grassroots NGOs in China are those organisations that have not registered at the Ministry of Civil Affairs. This definition does not apply to the animal organisations that are the participants of this research work for. The registration status is not necessary for many animal organisations because they cannot get more support after being registered successfully. They are still like other unregistered “grassroots” animal organisations that are struggling. The meaning of registration is not significant for them. Besides, the process of applying for registration takes a long time, so many animal organisations do not seek the registration. For this research, I define grassroots animal organisations as those that are operated entirely by individuals, not affiliated to any institutes, such as universities. All the animal organisations in this research are “grassroots”. Meanwhile, it is ambiguous if these animal organisations are NGOs, because most of them are doing small businesses to cover part of the cost of their organisations. Some of them have even registered as businesses, but they do not benefit too much from the business. The revenue could barely cover their cost. Therefore, in this research, I adopt the general term “social organisations” to define them.

The existing academic research on animal organisations in China has adopted the term “animal activists” to refer to those who work in the animal organisations (Cao, 2015; Li, 2021; Pettier, 2021; Barber, 2022). Their tasks include providing services, which refer to rescuing and taking care of stray animals, looking for donations, and also advocating for animal protection legislation and raising public awareness of animal welfare. It is reasonable to use this term since “activists” are those who not just “provide services” or “help”, but those who “attempt to change the underlying conditions that produce injustice or inequality”

(Horowitz, 2017, p. 5). However, the English word “activist” does not have a direct correspondence in Chinese. People who actively seek to join the Chinese Communist Party are also translated as “Party activists” or “activists for Party admission” (入党积极分子). Besides, the activists in the Western liberal democracies are often adversarial to the state and have the legitimacy to be dissidents, which is almost impossible in China right now. The animal activists in China are mostly engaged in something similar to Kevin O’Brien’s rightful resistance (1996): they are not against the central government or the system and not involved in ideological issues. Instead, they focus on the specific local issue and defend legal rights that are related to economic or livelihood grievances. Internet is their main channel for organising and speaking out. For example, Suzanne Barber’s research (2022) reveals that some animal activists intercept and report the smuggling trucks of dogs and cats for small restaurants to the authorities in the name of food safety. If some local officials are suspected of having accepted bribes from dog or cat meat dealers and are not motivated to respond, activists will post on social media about the smuggling trucks and the black market they found, so that the local officials have to respond under the public opinion pressure. Xi Jinping’s emphasis on anti-corruption is the context for this method, even though many believe the anti-corruption campaign is Xi’s way for concentrating his own power.

Engaging in rightful resistance can also be risky. Some animal activists have already been warned by police not to hold any public activities about animal rights. Some large organisations do not dare to organise protests against animal cruelty (Lam, 2019, p. 16). There have been some cases of small-scale protests against animal abusers, but the relevant social media posts might be censored quickly. It is unknown if these protests are organised by relevant pet owners or animal activists.

As for this research, some of the participants who attended the interview can be categorised as activists because they have advocated for animal welfare through social media, such as combating animal abusers and supporting the proposal of a comprehensive animal protection law during Two Sessions (annual meetings of National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, in Chinese called 两会). Other participants barely have the time and energy for advocacy, even though they have a strong wish to enhance animal welfare in China. They spend most of their time on the basic routine work in the organisation: rescuing stray animals, taking care of them and looking for adoption. They are more like volunteers than activists. In this research, the number of volunteers exceeds that of

activists. Being an activist requires knowledge and skills of how to manage social media accounts and how to advocate without being the target of authorities' censorship. The animal welfare organisation should be ready to assign labour resources for advocacy while the routine volunteering work has already been heavy. Under these circumstances, many organisations are not doing advocacy because they do not have such skills and resources. On Chinese social media, some individuals are famous for promoting animal welfare and combating animal cruelty. They are activists who do not belong to any organisations. This research, however, has not included them for analysis.

## **4.2 Burnout theory**

This research explores the burnout among Chinese animal volunteers and activists, therefore the existing scholarship about burnout, especially Paul Gorski's categorisation of burnout causes, has been used as the theoretical framework. This part introduces the development of burnout theory: from focusing solely on occupation and workplace to other areas that include volunteers and activists. The categorisations of burnout causes in the previous research is also included in this part.

### **4.2.1 What is burnout**

The term "burnout" is classified as an "occupational syndrome" by the World Health Organisation. It is caused by the "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" (World Health Organization, 2025). The concept of "staff burnout" was first mentioned in an article about officers for a juvenile delinquents' treatment programme in 1969 (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2002, p. 383). Then, Herbert Freudenberger introduced the concept of vocational burnout in 1974. Freudenberger observed how the staff members, once committed to their work, becomes exhausted and "inoperative". Currently, the most widely used definition of burnout comes from Maslach: "burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind" (Maslach, 2006, p. 45). Based on this definition, Schaufeli and Buunk categorised five symptoms of burnout. The first symptom is "affective manifestations, which refers to the changes of mood that includes depression, anxiety and even aggression of the person. The second symptom is "cognitive manifestations", which are the impairment of memory and attention. The third symptom is "physical manifestations". It is related to physical health problems, such as illnesses. The

fourth one is “behavioural manifestations” that relates to the changes in personal behaviour and the negative impacts, such as alcohol abuse. The fifth one is “motivational manifestations”, which are characterised by individuals’ decreased commitment to work. The degree of burnout varies among different people (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2002, p. 398).

#### 4.2.2 Burnout among volunteers and activists

The analysis of burnout is also applied to volunteers and activists. Both of them share characteristics of dedicated commitment and sacrifice, and they are usually vulnerable to stress and burnout (Maslach, 2006, p. 43; Cox, 2011, p. 10; Morse, 2022). burnout among volunteers and activists used to be neglected because many people feel voluntary work and activism are both “voluntary”, which makes them different from vocational burnout, and people could simply quit if they feel stressed (Gorski, 2019a; Morse, 2022). burnout causes high turnover rate of both volunteers and activists, which damages the functioning of volunteer work and activism. This problem, consequently, raises people’s awareness and paying attention to the burnout among volunteers and activists (Cox, 2011; Gorski, 2019a; Gorski, 2019b; Li, C. et al., 2023). The existing research has focused on exploring the causes of burnout, so that the organisations and volunteers or activists themselves could design relief measures based on the causes, for instance: holding routine check-in meetings and talking about their experience in the work; understanding volunteers and activists’ motivations before recruitment and helping them set realistic goals or motives for the work; reducing the work demands for those who feel stressed (Molina, 2017; Chen, 2015; Gauditz, 2025; Monaghan, 2024).

The existing research indicates that the causes of burnout among volunteers and activists are highly similar. Activists, however, need to face the possible retaliation that volunteers seldom face (Gorski, 2019b, p. 366). There have been many ways to categorise the causes of volunteers’ or activists’ burnout. Paul Gorski (2019a, 2019b) proposed three types of causes: internal causes, external causes, and in-movement causes. Stevenson and Morales (2022) divided the causes into two types: organisational causes and operational causes. Leslie Gauditz (2025) came up with interpersonal causes, organisational causes, and structural causes. The categorisations from different scholars overlap with each other. In my research, I adopt Paul Gorski’s categorisation which is more comprehensive and able to cover the causes for both volunteers and activists.

According to Gorski (2019a, 2019b), the internal causes are about the unique characteristics of volunteers or activists. First, their motivations are related to the possibility of feeling burned out. They might set unrealistically high goals for their work which causes overwork. Monaghan's research (2024) proves that high work demands is a crucial reason for the compassion fatigue, a form of burnout that relates to affective and motivational manifestations. heavy workload is also an important reason for burnout among participants of this research. Many animal volunteers and activists in China are suffering from heavy financial and work burden.

Second, Gorski (2019b) has also revealed that commitment and emotional labour can be reasons for burnout once activists or volunteers find they are under structural oppression: their devotion and efforts could not change the current situation, and they feel devastated. Lucas Mazur (2024) found that this situation occurs frequently among activists. They feel frustrated and less committed to activism when they find that they are powerless to change the structural oppression. When I interviewed the animal activists and volunteers from China, I found some of them have expressed negative emotions to the prospects of animal welfare in China. One participant said that even some Chinese people cannot live a decent life right now, let alone animals. Third, volunteers or activists sometimes neglect their own well-being, which relates to the martyrdom syndrome that is closely tied to the emotional investment and overwork. Martyrdom syndrome refers to how people who engage in voluntary work feel self-care is "indulgence" and "privilege", thus they do not take measures to relieve their burnout. They believe voluntary work is meant to be stressful (Gorski, 2015, p. 707). Martyrdom syndrome, according to Gorski (2019a, 2019b), might also cause tensions among activists or volunteers inside the organisation, which belongs to the in-movement causes of burnout. After interviewing with the participants of this research, I realise that many animal activists and volunteers in China regard burnout as normal for animal charity domain. They also hope to rescue as many animals as possible, which is an unrealistic goal and causes their burnout.

The in-movement causes refer to the conflicts or cultures inside the organisation (Gorski, 2019a; 2019b). The martyrdom syndrome, as mentioned above, makes some activists or volunteers regard burnout as normal. Consequently, those who complain about the burnout cannot get help inside the organisation. Sometimes they might even get aggressive reactions from others (Gorski, 2019a, p. 681). This situation worsens the burnout and might cause some activists or volunteers to quit the work. González (2015) suggests that community care should be a solution for relieving burnout instead of solely counting on self-care. The organisation

needs to recognise burnout and take measures for relief. Due to the limited time of my fieldwork, I have not experienced direct conflicts in the organisation. Participants have not directly talked about conflicts with others either. However, some small-scale management chaos and mistakes made by temporary volunteers have increased the workload in the organisation, which is related to the in-movement causes of burnout.

External causes, sometimes also called structural causes, are the social impacts on volunteers and activists that make them feel burned out (Gorski, 2019b; Gauditz, 2025). The specific details of the external causes vary among different kinds of voluntary work or activism and different national contexts (Gorski, 2019b, p. 374). Some voluntary work or activism cannot get support in certain contexts. Besides, social change is nonlinear, and social change work is long-term and collective, so it isn't easy to evaluate one person's contribution. Hence, the volunteers and activists might feel they cannot get reward for their hard work (Maslach, 2006, p. 45; Murad et al. 1997; Cox, 2011). Policies and legislation in China do not benefit animal volunteers and activists who cannot get support from the authorities and constantly receive doubts and attacks on social media. Some people on the internet question why they save animals instead of saving humans. Getting a premise for the animal organisation is also difficult because some people do not welcome having an animal organisation in their neighbourhood. Additionally, animal activists might get retaliation from animal abusers. One of my participants once got threat from the underground network of animal abusers. According to the interviews I have conducted, the external causes have been the essential cause for the burnout and impact the internal and in-movement causes among Chinese animal volunteers and activists.

## **5 Research design and fieldwork**

This chapter presents the methodology and fieldwork process of my research on burnout among Chinese animal volunteers and activists. The first part contains the introduction of the case study approach and expert interview in my research. The usage of instant messaging for interview is also discussed in this part. The second part provides an overview of the field work process and the comparison between different animal organisations.

### **5.1 Methodology**

This research has adopted case study approach to analyse the burnout of animal volunteers and activists in different animal organisations across China. Since previous research in this area is quite limited, I conducted exploratory expert interviews with animal volunteers and activists who are either the founders of their organisations or have stayed at the organisation for many years. They have special knowledge of this domain that makes them experts. However, experts also have information gaps and bias. It would be better to find more experts and cross check their answers, but my time for doing this research was limited and failed to find more participants. The existing participants' answers are not able to do the cross-check, which is a limitation of this research. As for the instant-messaging for research interviews, the interviews in this research is conducted through a Chinese instant-messaging app due to participants' preference. The pros and cons of this method is discussed in this part.

#### **5.1.1 Case study**

This study employs case study as the method for research. The case study research takes an idiographic approach that describes “an individual phenomenon holistically” and allows the researcher to examine the cases in a complex context (Newhart, 2023, p. 410). Since the situation of animal organisations in China is complicated and only a few scholars have ever conducted relevant research, I choose case study approach to have a holistic view of their situation and detect volunteers or activists' burnout in this context. Since the situation of the organisations might vary among different sizes and areas, I have adopted the multi-case study and found six animal welfare organisations scattered in different areas of China. The comparison of these organisations is presented in the latter part of this chapter.

### 5.1.2 Expert interviews

I have adopted the expert interview method and had semi-structured interviews with several animal volunteers and activists who are either the founders of their organisations or have stayed at the organisation for many years. The expert interview is a method of qualitative empirical research that emerged since the 1990s (Doeringer, 2021). It helps researchers to “explore or collect data” of a specific field by interviewing the expert who has the “exclusive realm of knowledge” (Van Audenhove, 2019; Meuser, 2009, p. 18). Bogner and Menz (2009) distinguish three types of expert interviews: exploratory, systematizing and theory-generating. My research focuses on the animal organisations in China, which have limited academic resources, thus I need to conduct the exploratory expert interviews. According to Jochen Gläser and Grit Laudel (2009), experts are people who have the “special knowledge of a special phenomenon” that the researchers are “interested in”. Therefore, researchers need to decide who can be the expert based on the objective of the research. For my research, I choose to contact the founders or the long-time volunteers or activists because they have more experience and could provide deeper insights compared to the temporary volunteers who only stay for a short period of time.

However, the expert interviews have shortages as a research method. The expert might have information gaps and potential biases that could affect the research (Von Soest, 2023). Von Soest (2023) suggest researchers compare the responses from different experts, which could help researchers to distinguish the experts’ misrepresentations. For my research, I found that some potential bias cannot be overcome even if I ask the same question to all interviewees. For example, one interviewee mentioned the corruption of foundations. The other interviewees, however, were not quite sure about this issue. The reason could be that, for those who do not seek registration under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, they do not seek support from foundations either. Therefore, they lack knowledge of this issue. Due to the time limit of my research, I am not able to find more participants for my research, especially those who have experience in getting registration and maintaining relationships with foundations. This is one of the limitations of my research.

### 5.1.3 Instant messaging for research interviews

The traditional way for qualitative research interviews is conducted face-to-face. In my research, the participants were scattered at different areas of China and my time for field work

in China was limited. It was too difficult for me to physically visit all of them. Therefore, I choose to use online platforms to conduct the interviews. My initial plan was to have online face-to-face interview on Tencent Meeting (腾讯会议), a Chinese app similar to Zoom. However, the participants for my research expressed that they feel uncomfortable and nervous about having online meetings. Some suggested using WeChat to communicate. Consequently, I changed my strategy and used WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging app, for interviews. The pros and cons of instant messaging for interviews have been discussed by some scholars. Dimond (2012) found that although the transcripts for traditional face-to-face interviews are usually longer than those of instant messaging interviews, the quality of transcripts is not related to the length. The traditional ones contain repetitions made by participants when they are talking, which does not affect the quality. The quality of data depends on the identity of interviewer/interviewee instead of the collection method. By exploring the usage of WhatsApp for interviews, Kaufmann (2020) suggests that instant messaging interviews provide an informal style of communication that could establish a comfortable communication atmosphere, and participants feel they have the control over the data they share. Meanwhile, participants could send pictures or videos as supplements for the interview. The flexibility of instant messaging interviews is an advantage for this interview method. For my study, the participants of the interview were all familiar with the WeChat app since it has been almost indispensable for everyday life in China. Participants were comfortable with sharing their thoughts through text or voice messages on WeChat, which encouraged open communication. The flexibility of this method enabled them to reply to me whenever they had time, which increased their willingness to join the interview. They have also sent me posts and videos from their social media accounts that were relevant to my questions in the interview. Nevertheless, instant messaging interviews still have disadvantages that could affect the quality of the interview. The interviewees need to respond to certain prompts quickly when they are in a traditional interview (Kaufmann, 2020). Instant messaging interviews, in contrast, allow participants to have time to adjust the information they send to the interviewer. In my research, this disadvantage increases the possibility that animal volunteers or activists provide limited responses to certain questions that they do not want to elaborate on.

## 5.2 Fieldwork process

This part explains the data collection and data analysis process in this research. Doing volunteer work and interviewing animal volunteers/activists were the main methods of collecting data. The information on animal organisations' social media accounts has also been helpful in understanding their current situation. Thematic analysis was then used for analysing data. The comparison of different animal organisations included in this research is presented at the end of this part.

### 5.2.1 Data collection

To obtain data for this research, I contacted an animal organisation and went there to do volunteer work during last summer holiday. Then, I used convenience sampling and purposive sampling to find interview participants. One animal volunteer that I reached out to through snowball sampling dropped out of the research, so in the end, there are totally six participants who joined the interview. The details of each participant are listed in Table 1. As the participants prefer not to conduct interviews on real-time meeting apps, I firstly adjusted and sent them the interview questions for them to type in their answers; then I asked follow-up questions and communicated with them through Chinese instant-messaging app, WeChat.

- Volunteer experience

Before starting the actual work for my thesis, I sent a message to an animal organisation at my hometown in Urumqi and asked about doing volunteer work during summer holiday. I got their contact on WeChat years ago when I came across their charity event at a shopping mall. They welcomed me to go because they lacked volunteers during summer holiday as their university student volunteers had gone home. There were five people who could help with the tasks in the organisation on a rotating basis. I spent about two weeks working at the shelter. The main task for me was cleaning the shelter and some other ad hoc tasks like trimming cats' claws. These tasks were more challenging than I anticipated: their shelter has more than 100 cats waiting for adoption and the room could become untidy in a short time. It is also common to get scratched by cats. One long-time volunteer told me that she once stayed at the shelter during Spring Festival public holidays and got scratched by a cat. It was a deep wound, and she was on the verge of breakdown. When I was working at the shelter, I could feel their tiredness of taking care of so many animals. They are also struggling with financial problems. They have a small online shop to sell cat foods, but the income could not cover all their cost.

They depend on crowdfunding to support the functioning of the organisation. Besides, every afternoon they host live streams on Chinese TikTok in order to get more attention and potential donations. Apart from these routine works, they are doing the tasks promoting the welfare of companion animals, such as combating the animal abusers and advocating for treating animals nicely. These kinds of tasks are mostly conducted online because of Chinese government's tight grip on civil society. Offline demonstrations are impossible. Through my volunteer experience, I became acutely aware of the burnout among animal volunteers and activists.

- Pilot study and participants

My initial plan was to conduct semi-structured interviews through the online meeting platform. I have taken Chen and Gorski's interview protocol (2015) and Stevenson's interview questions (2022) about activist/volunteer burnout as references for developing my own interview questions. The first part of the questions concerns the personal information of the participants. The second part is their experience and understanding of animal welfare organisations in China. The third part is about the burnout among animal welfare volunteers and activists.

Since I conduct expert interviews, the selection criteria for the participants of interviews was the founders or activists/volunteers who have worked for a long time in the animal welfare organisations. They are more experienced than temporary workers, so I choose them to be the "expert". It is challenging to find suitable participants in a limited period of time. For this reason, I have used many strategies for sampling. I started with convenience sampling for pilot study: I contacted a former colleague who is managing a small-scale animal organisation. Meanwhile, I sent messages to a friend who used to have a similar kind of animal organisation. To my surprise, both of them expressed the preference to join the interview by sending the questions to them to write, and I could ask follow-up questions based on the instant messaging app, WeChat, that we use. Therefore, I adjusted the questions for them and conducted the follow-up questions through WeChat. A lot of our communication on WeChat is through voice messages, which means I still need to transcribe the scripts. The automatically transcribed scripts generated by WeChat were mostly correct, so I only needed to check the scripts instead of transcribing word by word by myself. During the pilot study, I have also consulted them about the situation of burnout among animal volunteers/activists and suggestions for the interview questions. Both of them believed that burnout has been a serious

problem among animal volunteers and activists, which is consistent with my observation through volunteer work in summer and the response from other participants.

After finishing the pilot study, my friend introduced me to someone who used to work for an animal welfare organisation in Shenzhen for several years and now has left the organisation because her full-time job is busy, which is snowball sampling. She agreed to participate the interview and finished part of the questions that I sent her. For the remaining part and my follow-up questions, we negotiated to communicate around the new year holiday because she was busy at the end of the year. Then I contacted her two times near the holiday, but she replied she was still busy. One day, she sent a message to me and said that she was actually not sure about joining this interview because she had already left the organisation. She felt she was gossiping about the organisation behind their back. She did not refuse the interview because my friend introduced me to her. She felt embarrassed to say no. Consequently, I deleted her files for this research because participants' willingness to join the research is the priority that I need to consider.

Apart from the above-mentioned participants, I have also contacted an animal welfare organisation in Shanghai whose charity event I once attended years ago and bought their handmade products. One of their long-term volunteers was interested in this research and agreed to participate. Meanwhile, one activist/volunteer from the animal organisation where I volunteered during the summer also accepted my invitation to participate in this research. She is one of the three core members in this organisation.

In order to find more participants for my research, I used purposive sampling and reached out to many other animal organisations online. Social media platforms are the main channel to communicate with animal organisations. Since there are numerous animal organisations on social media, I preferred those that have begun posting at least two years ago, which means this organisation has already existed for at least two years and endured difficulties. Besides, I went through their posts and checked the feedback of the animals they have saved, as well as their disclosure of how they spend donations. I also joined their group chats if they have one, so that I can get more detailed updates. I contacted about ten organisations that meet my selection criteria. Two of them gave me positive responses and agreed to the interview. The basic information of all the participants is listed below. The status of participants is whether they are volunteers or activists. Those who have worked for advocating companion animal welfare are categorised as activists.

Table 1. Information of participants

| Participant | Age               | Gender | Education level        | Location | Years of experience | Status                |
|-------------|-------------------|--------|------------------------|----------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| A           | 38                | Female | Bachelor degree        | Shanghai | 7                   | Volunteer(co-founder) |
| B           | 39                | Female | Bachelor degree        | Wuhan    | 4                   | Volunteer(co-founder) |
| C           | Born in the 1990s | Female | College diploma        | Shanghai | 5                   | Volunteer             |
| D           | 40                | Female | Bachelor degree        | Urumqi   | 5                   | Activist              |
| E           | Born after 1995   | Male   | Drop out of university | Beijing  | 8                   | Activist(founder)     |
| F           | Born in the 1990s | Female | College diploma        | Nanchong | 4                   | Volunteer             |

Participant A, co-founder of the organisation, joined the pilot study: Participant A's full-time job is at a university in Shanghai. Her motivation for becoming an animal volunteer is that she once rescued a kitten by herself and found an adoption family. Since then, she became aware of the stray animals that need help. She uses her spare time to manage the animal organisation that she started with two friends. They are responsible for different areas: participant A mainly rescues stray animals and looks for adoption families. One friend provides the premises, and another friend provides more financial support than the others. They take turns to take care of the animals waiting for adoption. They have also employed a cleaner to help them cleaning the shelter and looking after animals. The premise is close to the university, so they sometimes cooperate with the campus animal rescue club organised by students. But they do not have student volunteers. There are two main financial sources for the organisation: one is the money from the founders and sometimes the teachers in the university who also care about companion animal welfare, the other is their pet boarding service business. They use the spare space of the premise for boarding service. The revenue is used for managing the organisation. However, they might still lack money when they come across emergencies, such as saving a stray animal with a serious disease. Since their organisation mainly focus on rescuing animals, I categorise participant A as a volunteer, not an activist.

Participant B, founder of the organisation, joined the pilot study: She used to be the manager of a hostel in Wuhan. The reason she rescued stray animals was that she witnessed their difficulties and wanted to help. She started the organisation with two other friends who had similar thoughts, but she was the principal person in charge of the organisation. The hostel

was close to a small mountain and had a large garden, which was the premises for the animals they rescued. The number of animals staying in their shelter was kept around 20-30 due to their capacity. The source of rescue came from Wuhan and sometimes people from nearby places who contacted them through social media. The participant and her friends are mainly responsible for all the work and finance of the organisation. The other staff at the hostel sometimes help them with taking care of animals. Once they rescued an animal, they would post on social media to find an adoption family. Since they barely got involved in animal welfare advocacy or activism, I categorise this participant as a volunteer plus founder of the animal organisation. After the hostel was closed in 2019, participant B took the cats that had not been accepted by any adoption families to her home. She is not involved in any animal rescue operation now and has passed the National Unified Legal Professional Qualification Examination. She is now working as a trainee lawyer.

Participant C, long-term volunteer: Participant C has worked as the volunteer for an animal organisation for about five years. She joined the voluntary work because she once adopted a dog and then rescued a cat. She found that many stray animals need help, so she became a volunteer. She told me that she is doing a freelance job and usually does volunteer work on Friday afternoons and weekends. The animal organisation she works for sometimes holds charity events at shopping malls at weekends. During the weekends without events, she helps with cleaning the shelter. The organisation she works for not only rescues stray animals but also cooperates with the animal groups of some residential complexes (居民小区) to conduct TNR (trap-neuter-return) for stray animals. In the past five years, according to participant C, the organisation has rescued and found adoption families for thousands of animals. The organisation depends heavily on donations. Although they have made some handmade products to sell at the charity events, the revenue is not able to cover the cost. Their organisation has not spent too much time on advocacy. They only repost from others the posters or slogans that promote animal welfare on social media. Therefore, I categorise participant C as volunteer.

Participant D, long-term volunteer, activist: Participant D is working at the animal organisation that I volunteered during summer holiday. She has stayed at the organisation for about five years. She joined this animal organisation because she has her own pets and sometimes helps stray animals by herself. This animal organisation is the only one she has heard about, so she decided to come and help. Her full-time job is freelancer, so she has time to come to the organisation almost every day. According to participant D, this organisation is

a relatively large one that specialises in helping stray cats in Urumqi. Their tasks extend beyond rescuing. They also do advocacy for companion animals' welfare. They also have an online shop that sells pet products. When I was volunteering at the organisation, I asked the founder if the revenue from online businesses could support the organisation. She said it could not and they still depend on crowdfunding and donations. There are three core members, including participant D. Temporary volunteers comprise people who are enthusiastic about companion animal welfare and students from local universities. The organisation has cooperated with a local agricultural university and animal protection club. Students could get credits by doing volunteer work at the organisation.

Participant D's tasks include finding suitable adoption families, dealing with online businesses and helping with combating animal abusers when needed. When they find or get reports about someone who tortures companion animals, mostly through social media, they first gather information about the person and the place. Then they will report the incident to the police and the relevant social media platform. Participant D told me that the underground animal abuse network has not reached Xinjiang yet, but there are some people who treat companion animals harshly and post relevant videos online. For example, a man claimed that a stray cat harmed the doves he kept, so he caught the cat in a cage and burned the cat to death. He posted this cruel video on TikTok. Activists of this organisation gathered information of this man and secretly went to his place to check. Later, they consulted lawyers and reported this case to the police. In the end, this man was given 7 days of administrative detention (行政拘留). Since participant D has worked for animal welfare advocacy, I categorise her as activist. However, it should be noted that they do not dare to hold any demonstrations or protests as the activists in liberal democracies. They only use social media to advocate. Their combat against animal abusers depends on police's response.

Participant E, founder, activist: Participant E is the founder of an animal organisation that has been transformed into a cat cafe. When he was 8 years old, he witnessed some people beating a cat. That incident motivates him now to rescue as many cats as he is capable of. He started rescuing cats when he was an undergraduate student. He rented an apartment near the campus as a shelter. The money came from his part-time job and his parents. Soon the number of cats exceeds the capacity of the apartment. Therefore, he rented a commercial space near the campus. Some students came to work as volunteers. The cost of renting commercial space is high. However, he was not willing to accept donations, thus, he transformed the space into a cat cafe. The revenue of cat cafe is used to cover some of the cost. Last year he rented another

place in the countryside as a shelter for the dogs that he rescued. He has also recently changed his mind and started accepting donations of cat or dog food because the cost has doubled. I categorise him as an activist because he has been very active on many social media platforms to promote animal welfare and has gained a lot of followers since 2024. He said he found that many people are not aware of the welfare of companion animals, while the pet market is expanding rapidly. He wants to educate the public, especially children, that we should treat companion animals nicely.

Participant F, long-term volunteer: Participant F has worked for the organisation for about 4 years. Her full-time job is freelance, so she comes to work as volunteer whenever she has spare time. Her main tasks are managing the social media accounts of the organisation and sometimes comes to the shelter to do ad-hoc tasks. According to F, this organisation was established in 2012. There are three long-term volunteers who help the founder to manage the organisation. They have also employed a cleaner who helps with cleaning the shelter. The sources of the rescued animals are diverse. Many of them come from the black market dealers' trucks that have been reported by activists. Some are found by the followers of their social media account and reported to them. Since their shelter is located in the countryside, people from nearby villages will also send diseased or unwanted newborn dogs and cats to them. Social media followers' donations are the main financial resource. The organisation uses social media to disclose their everyday work and financial details. Besides, some talented donors have designed cartoons of cats and dogs for them, and the organisation uses these designs to make ornaments and bags, so that they can sell on their online shop. The revenue of the online business is used for the organisation. Participant F said that they have registered successfully as social group (社会团体) under the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2024.

However, this registration needs to be reviewed every year and the process is very complicated. Meanwhile, this registration has not brought them many benefits and their situation has not improved. Therefore, they decided to give up reviewing for the next year.

- Interviews on WeChat

All of my interviews were conducted through WeChat. First, I sent the revised questions to participants. After they finished and sent them back, I checked their answers and prepared follow-up questions and asked them on WeChat. The process of asking follow-up questions was similar to the casual chat on WeChat. They could send both voice messages and text messages. We did not need to allocate a specific time to do the interview. We could reply

whenever we have time. This casual way of communication has motivated them to participate since they are reluctant to interviews on real-time meeting platforms. Besides, some of them sent me their social media posts through WeChat because some posts are relevant to my questions. These posts become the supplement for the interview.

Apart from the interviews, I have an interesting observation. When I reached out to volunteers and activists, I suggested that I could give incentives to participants as a thank-you for their time. None of them accepted money. Instead, they suggested that I could buy food for cats and dogs in their shelters. Later, when I communicated with the participants, they taught me an important way to distinguish whether an animal welfare organisation is a scam: if this organisation only accepts money as donations and refuses animal food, then the possibility of a scam is high. They did not receive money as incentives because they wanted to keep their reputation. Most of the money donations are through crowdfunding platforms or people who are familiar with their organisations. Other than that, they accept food donations through various sources.

### 5.2.2 Data analysis

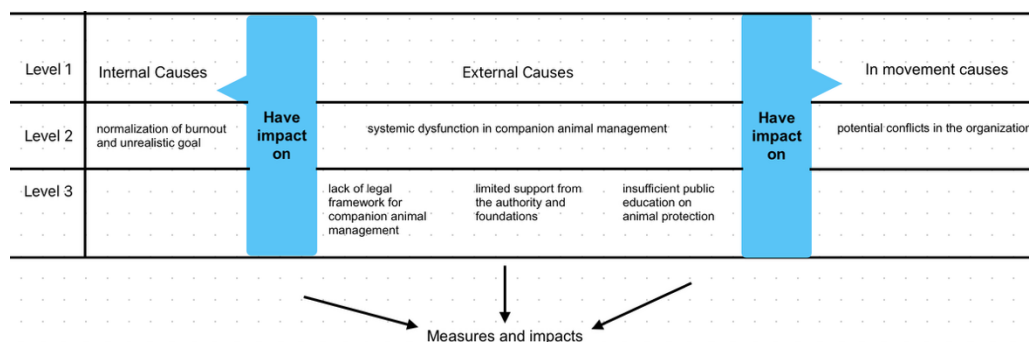
This research adopts thematic analysis as the method for analysing the interview data. Braun and Clark (2006) propose a six-step framework for thematic analysis: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report.

For my research, firstly, I created six different documents for my six participants. After checking the transcript, I copied and pasted the transcript into documents with the questions that participants answered. The follow-up questions are categorised according to the initial interview questions in the questionnaire. Some participants have sent me the links to their social media posts if these posts are relevant to the questions that I asked. I have also categorised these social media links into the relevant questions. When the content of the social media post is useful for analysis, I copied or transcribed the text into the document. As for the organisation I volunteered for and my friends' organisations that I have been quite familiar with, I added my observations and notes to the relevant document.

The next step is to generate the initial codes. I used manual coding through the comment function of Microsoft Word because the translation from Chinese into English is not too challenging for me, and getting familiar with software like NVivo takes extra time. I did not

translate the entire document into English. Only the parts that are written into the thesis are translated. I highlighted the data with meaningful features and added my comments about the data for further analysis and finding themes. The challenge for this part is the risk of overcoding. Some parts are not highly relevant, but might still be meaningful. I need to decide whether to code them or not.

Then, I grouped the codes into meaningful themes. This is conducted based on Gorski's theoretical framework of activist/volunteer burnout (2019a, 2019b). Based on Gorski's framework, the emphasis of the research is on the causes of burnout because the suggested measures to relieve burnout derive from the causes. There are five groups that I categorised the codes into: the symptoms of their burnout, the internal causes of burnout, the external causes of burnout, the in-movement causes of burnout, the measures to relieve and impacts. I have used different colours to highlight data for each group so that I could identify them easily. By reviewing the groups, I have identified the patterns of the causes of burnout among participants and propose themes and sub-themes as follows: the normalisation of burnout and unrealistic goals (correspond to internal causes); the systemic dysfunction in companion animal management (correspond to external causes) and the sub-themes are the lack of legal framework for companion animal management, the limited support for animal welfare organisations and insufficient public education on animal protection. The in-movement causes have not been obvious in participants' interviews. I developed this part mainly through my observation during fieldwork. The measures to relieve burnout and impacts are analysed after the causes. An interesting finding for this research is that, compared to existing scholarship about volunteer/activist burnout in the European and US background, the external causes have been crucial for the burnout and even affect the other two causes (internal and in-movement causes), which are presented in the following picture:



Picture 1. Mind map of the essential role of external causes.

### 5.3 Comparison of animal organisations

Six animal organisations have been covered in this research. They are different in their major tasks, the financial sources, the capacity to rescue animals and the geographical impacts from the city they are based in.

- Major tasks

Participant A, B, C and F's organisations have highly similar tasks: rescuing stray animals, looking for adoption families and sometimes providing guidance for pet owners whose pets need help. They do not have animal welfare advocacy as a routine task. Only under special occasions, such as the Two Sessions meetings or when a notorious animal abuse incident happens, they might post about the need for companion animals legislation on social media with many other pet owners. Therefore, I categorise them as volunteers, not activists.

Participant D and E's organisations, however, have advocacy as their routine work.

Participant D's organisation has been active on combating animal abuse while Participant E's organisation focuses on promoting companion animal welfare. I categorise them as animal activists.

- Financial sources

The financial resources of participant A and B's organisations are mainly from the founders themselves or some stable donors. Sometimes the person who found the animal that needs help is willing to donate some money to the organisation to rescue this animal. They could get some support from the businesses they do, like providing pet boarding, but the revenue cannot cover their cost.

Participant C, D and F's organisations depend on both donations and revenue from their small businesses. Participant C's organisation makes handmade products that can be sold at charity events in shopping malls. Participant D's organisation has an online shop and sells some pet food and pet products. Participant F's organisation also has a similar online shop. However, as I have mentioned in the previous part, small businesses are used to relieve their financial burden, but earnings are far from enough. These organisations highly depend on donations. Crowdfunding platforms and direct donations are all accepted. Direct donations are mainly animal food or products.

Participant E's organisation is a little bit special. He used to be the one who paid for everything in this organisation because his personal financial situation is relatively good. When they moved to a larger commercial place, they transformed it into a cat cafe to cover part of the rents. Recently, he has started accepting donations of food because the cost is getting higher after rescuing many more animals. According to E, he has spent millions of yuan on rescuing stray animals.

- Capacity to rescue animals

Participant A and B's organisations have the most limited capacity in rescuing. They highly depend on their founders. The number of volunteers who can routinely come to help, other than founders themselves, is usually around two. Participant B has actually closed the organisation and focuses on taking care of the remaining animals. Their capacity is about keeping around 20 to 30 rescued animals in the shelters.

Participant C's organisation used to function well and has rescued thousands of stray animals and found adopters for them. According to C, they have serious financial problems after COVID-19 pandemic. The economic recession in China affects their donations and revenues from charity events. They have almost stopped rescuing new animals and are on the edge of closing.

Participant D's organisation is similar to C's, but their current situation is better than C's. Their donations are mostly from crowdfunding. D did not mention the declining of donations due to the economic recession. However, their financial situation does not support them in accepting too many animals either. They have been cautious on rescuing the most needed stray animals. One advantage for them is that they are cooperating with the animal protection club at local universities. They have student volunteers who come to help.

Participant E said his organisation has rescued around 700 animals and still has more than one hundred in the shelter waiting for adoption. He has expanded the shelter to another place in the suburbs to contain large dogs.

Participant F's organisation currently has about 800 animals waiting for adoption in the shelter. Their major shelter is in the countryside to contain a large number of animals, especially large dogs.

- Geographical impacts

These six animal organisations are from different areas of China. The cities they are based in are also of different tiers. Although many factors could impact their function, the geographical factors should not be ignored.



Picture 2. Locations of organisations (created based on the map from Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Shanghai, Wuhan, Urumqi and Beijing are circled in the map. The approximate location of Nanchong (南充) is indicated by a red dot. Picture: Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Based on my observations and communication with them, their locations have impacts on the sources of donations. In Shanghai, there are many shopping malls that hold charity events. As participant C said, applying for a counter in these charity events is much easier than applying for registration from the government or dealing with foundations. Perhaps shopping malls are also willing to use pets to attract people into their malls. The other cities have similar events. For example, I once attended one in Urumqi. However, compared to Urumqi, Shanghai has many more such chances and the scale could be bigger. Participant B and E stay at Wuhan and Beijing respectively. Based on the information on social media, Wuhan and Beijing also have charity events for animal organisations, but B and E have not attended. Participant F's organisation is at Nanchong, a city in Southwestern China. It is not a large city or the capital of the province. There have been such charity events but not a lot. According to F, the donations from the locals are limited, so they have spent more time on social media to attract

donations across China. Nevertheless, as participant C said, the revenue from charity events dropped due to economic recession, the charity events in big cities are not stable financial sources.

The social environment in large cities and small cities might also be different. As participant D once said when I volunteered:

**Participants #D:** Xinjiang (新疆) is falling behind “mainland big cities” (内地大城市, this mainland refers to the provinces in the central or coastal areas of China) in so many aspects, not just good aspects, but also bad aspects. The number of animal abuse cases in Xinjiang is not a lot, but in big cities, animal abusers are rampaging.

There are many aspects about the social environment that are highly related to the geographical locations. For example, animal organisations’ relation with the local authorities, local people’s mentality about companion animals’ status. Due to the limited time of field work, I has not been able to explore more on this topic, which is a limitation of this research.

## 6 Results and analysis

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the research. According to the interviews with six participants, they all agree that burnout is common among animal volunteers and activists in China. Their co-workers and themselves have all suffered from burnout to some extent. The first part of this chapter presents the symptoms of burnout that six participants have described, which correspond to Schaufeli and Buunk's categorisation of burnout symptoms (2002). The second part is the analysis of the causes of burnout based on the levels of themes and sub-themes in the previous chapter. The measures to relieve and the impacts of burnout are discussed in the following part.

### 6.1 Symptoms of burnout among animal volunteers and activists

The participants of this research have talked about the symptoms of burnout on themselves as well as the other coworkers. According to Schaufeli and Buunk (2002), there are five types of burnout symptoms: affective manifestations, cognitive manifestations, physical manifestations, behavioural manifestations and motivational manifestations. The description from six participants corresponds to three manifestations: affective, physical and motivational manifestations.

Affective manifestations: as mentioned in the previous chapter about burnout research, this manifestation refers to the changes of mood, including depression, anxiety and even aggressiveness. Participant A mentioned that finding adoption families for the stray animals that she has rescued is always difficult, which causes her serious anxiety (焦虑):

**Participant #A:** After rescuing and curing a stray cat with serious disease, what should you do? You cannot keep all of them. It is impossible. You need to find an adoption home for them.

However, finding adoption is not an easy task, which will be elaborated in the later part about causes of burnout. Participant B also expressed that anxiety used to be a problem for her:

**Participant #B:** There are always new animals that need your help, new problems that you need to solve. Yet you know it is unrealistic for you to solve all the problems.

She said she sometimes reflected upon her anxiety and realised this has made her become impatient and even aggressive to others. Some other animal volunteers, as she observed, take it out on other people, which worsens the working environment. Participant C has also talked about the changes of mood among animal volunteers and described them as “negative energy”

(负能量). Animal volunteers should learn to deal with it. Participant D and participant F have both expressed cynicism after witnessing the miserable lives of many stray animals and the unsupportive public environment. Participant F has put it clearly: “human beings are terrible creatures” (人类就是很恶劣的生物). Participant E, nevertheless, used to be troubled by depression after experiencing some incidents related to animal rescuing and advocacy. Negative comments are common under the videos promoting companion animal welfare. He also mentioned an incident that was a severe blow to him:

**Participant #E:** Back in 2021, someone left a box of five kittens at the door (of our organisation) at midnight. We found that these kittens had infectious diseases [...] We tried to save these kittens. Every night, I had to wake up every four hours (to feed the kittens). However, three kittens still died. I held them in my arms and saw them stop breathing [...] Six cats in our shelters were infected and died. We spent about 65 000 yuan (for cats’ medical treatments) [...] I had a very hard time [...] I went to the hospital and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

By doing volunteer work at participant D’s organisation last summer, as well as the short stay at participant B’s organisation years ago, I could feel how the hard work and the lack of support have made some volunteers and activists exhausted and sometimes impatient or aggressive to others. Nevertheless, they know that these feelings are negative and have made efforts to suppress them, which has actually increased their burden.

Apart from affective manifestations of burnout that have been mentioned by all six participants of this research, the physical manifestations of burnout have also been mentioned by some participants: Participant A has experienced insomnia, toothache and menstrual irregularities when the organisation came across difficulties, such as infectious disease among animals in the shelter or sent animals to an unreliable adoption family. Participant F mentioned that some volunteers’ chronic diseases might get worse after heavy work, especially elderly volunteers. The founder of F’s organisation, who is now in her 50s, is suffering from chronic backache and knee pain because of physical work for the organisation.

Motivational manifestations, according to Schaufeli and Buunk (2002), refer to the decreased commitment to work. This is relevant to the high turnover rate of volunteers and activists. Participant F told me that many young people have come to help promote their organisation and volunteered at the shelter, but they cannot keep it up for long. She has stayed at the organisation for about 4 years, which is a pretty long period of time compared to others. Participant D and E have both thought of giving up when they get a serious scratch by cats or find a terrible mess that animals have made in the shelter. They admit that doing volunteer

work at an animal shelter is not easy and many people could not sustain. Participant E once received threats from animal abusers, and his personal information was disclosed on the internet by them. This kind of personal threat damaged his commitment to advocacy to some degree. Participant B has now quit from the animal charity work and focuses on taking care of the cats that have not been adopted from her previous organisation. The heavy burden makes it extremely difficult to stay in the animal charity domain.

## **6.2 Causes of burnout**

This part focuses on the causes of burnout among animal volunteers and activists in China. The analysis of the data reveals that the external causes have played a crucial role in this research, compared to the previous research in the European and the US context. Therefore, I firstly present the external causes of burnout following the levels and themes of the codes. Then I extend to the internal causes of burnout which is closely connected to the external causes. The in-movement causes are also included in this part even though the participants have not mentioned it directly. My observation in the fieldwork shows that the conflicts inside the organisation are possible, which increases the chance of getting burnout.

### **6.2.1 External causes: systemic dysfunction in companion animal management**

The difficult situation of animal organisations is not the malfunction of specific parts, steps or people. Instead, it is the systemic dysfunction of the entire management system of companion animals. At the origin, there is no relevant legislation for companion animals while the pet market has been booming. In terms of the practical functioning of animal organisations, they cannot get support from the authority. The support from the foundations is also limited. Meanwhile, fraud in charity sector is still a problem even after the Charity Law came into effect, which undermines people's willingness to donate. The law enforcement is inadequate, which causes not only the fraud in charity sector, but also the emergence of animal abuse underground network. Besides, the public education about animal protection is insufficient. The public is aware of the protection for wild animals, but not for other kinds of animals. Animal activists are often criticised on social media for rescuing animals instead of humans.

- The lack of legal framework for companion animal management

The lack of relevant legislation for companion animals has been the origin of many problems that animal organisations face and the causes of burnout. All six participants have expressed

their organisation's pressure due to financial difficulties. However, money was not a problem when the organisation was first established. At first, they did not intend to rescue hundreds of stray animals. They often started with a few stray animals that needed help and they were capable of helping them. However, they soon discovered that the number of animals kept increasing. There are too many abandoned animals that need help, yet their ability to help is limited. Many volunteers cannot stand leaving these poor animals alone, so they keep on rescuing new animals. Participant A and B have both said that they feel terrible when they find animals in miserable condition and they cannot help. Participant F describes how they cannot stop receiving new animals as "snowballing" (一发不可收拾). This situation makes volunteers set unrealistic goals of rescuing and increases the possibility of getting burnout.

In 2021, it was reported that the number of stray dogs in China is about 40 million and the number of stray cats is 53 million (Lin, 2023). The increasing number of abandoned companion animals is the result of the booming pet market and the lack of relevant regulations. Since the companion animals are regarded as mere commodities under current laws (Carpenter, 2016, p. 381), pet shops could breed them without considering animal welfare. Some pet shops let animals live in bad environment to reduce the cost of breeding. These kinds of shops are referred to by animal volunteers and activists as Backyard Breeder (后院猫舍, 后院狗舍). Animals of backyard breeders usually have various types of defects and diseases. On Chinese social media, it is common to see someone complaining that the pet they bought got serious disease and died quickly after bringing them home. If these backyard breeders go bankrupt and decide to close the shop, they just abandon these animals. Participant A has joined a WeChat group chat that is organised by a larger animal organisation in Shanghai. She told me that large organisation has rescued many pets abandoned by backyard breeders. These animals usually have many diseases, and the organisation spends a lot of money on curing them. Pet shops are not the only source of stray animals. Some pet owners might also abandon their pets because there is no legal punishment for doing so. Participant D, E and F have all experienced that pet owners secretly abandon their pets at the gate of the organisation because they do not want to send them to pet hospital once they are ill. They left the "burden" to animal organisations. Sometimes volunteers receive kittens and puppies because the pet owner did not neuter their pets and were not willing to keep these newborn kittens and puppies. Sometimes there are other casual reasons that some pet owners abandon their pets for, such as moving to another city or getting pregnant. They go to the animal organisation and ask the volunteers to accept their abandoned

pets. Animal organisations, in these pet owners' eyes, become the ideal place to abandon animals without feeling guilty. Participant A said this kind of action is actually “moral blackmail” (道德绑架). Pet owners transfer their responsibility to animal organisations. Volunteers feel guilty if they do not accept these abandoned animals but accepting them increases the financial burden of the organisation. Even if the pet owners have not abandoned pets at the animal organisation, these abandoned animals could easily get hurt or diseases on streets because they do not have the ability to survive. In the end, it is animal organisations that rescue these injured or ill stray pets.

Apart from pet shops and pet owners, black market of dog and cat meat can also be the source of rescued animals. Participant F told me that the organisation she works for has rescued many dogs and cats from the smuggling trucks of black market. Animal activists are responsible for detecting smuggling trucks and reporting to the authorities related to food security, but the authorities do not take the responsibility of taking care of the animals on trucks. The animal volunteers take these animals back into their shelters. On one truck, there could be about a hundred cats or dogs. Sometimes one organisation is not capable of accepting all these animals and needs to cooperate with other animal organisations. The sudden large amounts of animals increases the burden of animal organisations.

Finding adoption family for animals is the next task for animal volunteers. The shelters are meant to be the transit hub instead of a permanent home for stray animals. Nevertheless, finding adoption is extremely difficult. There is no regulations or legislations about the adoption. After posting the adoption information online, volunteers might encounter potential adopters with various kinds of motivations and characters. Participant A once sent a kitten to an adopter who was not willing to cover the balcony with a net before bringing the kitten home. Participant A reminded the adopter that net could prevent the kitten from falling from the balcony and asked the adopter to do it at once after bringing the kitten home. However, the adopter did not do it and the kitten fell from the balcony and died. Participant A felt sad and guilty about this. She felt it was her fault for sending the kitten to a reckless adopter. This incident caused a lot of physical manifestations of burnout on her. Participant E also complained about some potential adopters:

**Participant #E:** Some people think adopting equals getting a free pet [...] they come to us and ask if we have a certain type of breed. We tell them our pedigree cats are adult cats that have been abandoned. Then they say they only want kittens, not adult cats [...] They don't understand we are not a pet shop.

Participant F said she does not trust finding suitable adopters through social media. She has met with some potential adopters who are not good. Yet she knows that the organisation could not afford keeping all these animals permanently. Besides, many volunteers worry that they might send animals to animal abusers who pretend to be good adopters. Although my participants have not encountered such incident, they know that many other volunteers have experienced this and became devastated when they knew that the animal had been abused to death.

Setting strict rules and signing contracts with adopters are regarded as the method to select suitable adoption families. These rules usually include having stable income and apartment to keep pets, not letting pets play outside the apartment by themselves and allowing volunteers make home visit for a period of time. Volunteers require adopters to sign a contract with the organisation to make sure they will take good care of the animals. However, these rules and contracts are not guaranteed by law and not all adopters are willing to accept. Participant A believes that volunteers and adopters cannot establish trust with each other. Volunteers worry that adopters do not take good care of animals while adopters are afraid of personal data breach because the rules and contracts are formulated by volunteers, not the authorities. Some adopters even criticise that the animal organisations are scams. Participant E said they have set a rule that adopters should pay a deposit fee of 300 yuan when they adopt an animal, which will be returned a year later if they have not given up and returned the animal back to the shelter. They set this rule because many adopters regret and send animals back to them soon after bringing animals home, which causes extra work for volunteers. Nevertheless, some adopters believe adoption should be free. They refuse to pay and doubt the organisation is scamming their money. In general, finding adoption has been an exhausting task and causes burnout. Participant A said that now she chooses to “go with the flow” (佛系). She keeps the animals in the shelter instead of rushing to send them out, but the price is that she could not accept too many new animals anymore.

The increasing number of animals not only deteriorates the financial situation, but also causes overwork among volunteers. All six participants have complained about the exhaustion of taking care of too many animals. Participant A and B both said that an essential task of being an animal volunteer is to keep the shelter clean and keep animals healthy. It sounds easy, but practising it is not easy at all. These tasks are repetitive and physically demanding. Animals are sometimes naughty and make a mess in the shelter. Participant E described a common scene when he first comes to the shelter in the morning:

**Participant #E:** When I am the first one who come to the shelter, I could witness how the food bowls and water bowls were overturned and scattered in the room. On the floor, there could be urine and shits. The smell in the room could be so repulsive that I could not breathe.

Getting scratched by animals is a common thing. Participant D once got a deep wound by cat scratching and participant F was bitten by a dog and scratched by cats when giving them medicines. When the number of animals increases, the work in the shelter doubles. The increasing number of animals also increases the possibility of infectious diseases. The dogs in participant F's organisation suffered kennel cough last winter. Taking care of ill dogs requires extra work from volunteers. Taking dogs to the hospital increased financial burdens.

For participant D and E, apart from physical labour, they also need to do advocacy work. It would be better if they could recruit more volunteers or activists. However, the turnover rate in animal organisations is high. Many people come for a while and could not endure the heavy workload. When I was doing volunteer work during the summer, I also felt exhausted by the heavy physical work. Meanwhile, although I have my own cat and have experience in communicating with cats, I almost got scratched when I was at the shelter for the first time. Many cats in the shelter were not intended to harm humans. Instead, they wish to play with humans and rushed to me. When I squatted down, many cats jumped on my shoulder and some fell down. When they fell down they used paws to balance, which could cause scratches. They are like children in an orphanage who get excited if someone comes to visit, which is heartbreaking. Working in an animal shelter requires not only physical strength, but also emotional strength.



Picture 3. Participant D's organisation put healthy adult cats in large rooms to let them walk around and kittens or sick cats in another room with cages. The tips of taking care of relevant cats are on the paper pasted on cages. Photo: Lu Niu.

Volunteers' willingness to stay is important, but their ability might be even more important. Some participants have complained that some temporary volunteers have no idea how to take care of animals. They might mistakenly put ill animals and healthy animals in the same room, which is pretty dangerous. Unskilled temporary volunteers might cause trouble and bring extra work to long-term volunteers. Some organisations have tried to pay professional cleaners who can help with cleaning shelters, but their financial situation only allows them to hire one or two cleaners at most. It is impossible to count on one or two cleaners to do all the tasks in the shelter. Participant F said their organisation's hired cleaners also have high turnover rate like volunteers, because they could not afford enough salary and the tasks are physically demanding. In the end, founders and long-term volunteers are still the main force of managing the organisation.

With the increasing number of animals, founders need to consider changing to a larger place as the premise for shelter. Participants D and E's shelters used to be in private apartments. After the number of animals increased, they moved to commercial places with higher rents. Higher rents worsen their financial burden. Participant E transformed his shelter into a cat cafe to cover part of their rent. However, the commercial places in the city are not always enough to contain hundreds of animals, especially with large dogs. Participant E has recently

rented a yard in the suburbs of the city as the shelter for dogs. Participant F's organisation also has shelter in the countryside because the local authorities do not allow them to keep large dogs in the downtown area, which is considered unsafe. Moving to the outskirts of city means having larger spaces, but also reduces the chance of recruiting new volunteers because it is too far. Potential adopters might give up coming to the shelter if they do not have cars. The organisation that I volunteered for once considered moving to the countryside, but finally gave up, because they are cooperating with the animal protection clubs at the local university. Students cannot visit them if they move to the countryside. Their current location in downtown also enables them to join some charity events in shopping malls and welcome the public to visit their organisation. However, they have to afford higher rents in downtown and limited space for animals.

- Limited support from the authority and foundations

All six participants consider their organisations operate independently. They have not received support from the authorities and limited support from foundations. For participants A and B, their organisations depend on their own efforts and donations from some stable donors. They do not expect getting support from local governments or some animal foundations. Participant A once had a conflict with a neighbour because of the location of her shelter. The neighbour kept on harassing her place, so she reported to the local residents' committee and grassroots civil servants, but they were not enthusiastic about solving this problem. Participant D is also unsatisfied with the grassroots civil servants' attitude. She described them as "turning a blind eye" (睁一只眼闭一只眼) when the organisation was given a hard time by the property management company of the commercial place. Participant F's organisation has registered as a social group (社会团体) successfully, but she said the process is exhausting. They have spent years getting the registration. Meanwhile, the registration has not brought many benefits for the organisation. They cannot get any extra benefits other than the food donations from some pet food companies. She said the donated food is far from enough because there are hundreds of animals in the shelter. The food is consumed very quickly. The registration needs to be renewed every year. Participant F said the organisation does not intend to renew it because the process is too complicated and the registration cannot solve the problems of their organisation. One animal activist once posted on social media complaining that the increasing number of stray animals is the result of the government's dysfunction, but grassroots animal organisations have taken the responsibility. The activist

deleted the post later since criticising the government is not a wise thing to do as the organisation still needs help.

The foundations are not helpful to solving animal organisations' difficulties either. Participant B criticised that some foundations collaborated with large companies. They aim for getting pet owners' attention and advertising themselves, instead of doing meaningful things for stray animals. For example, they have established many cat food boxes with cameras in cities. People could download the relevant app on their phones and pay for food. If some stray cats come to eat the food in the boxes, they can watch them live through their phones. Participant B believes it is more urgent to neuter stray cats to control the increasing number, or to cure those who are ill. These food boxes are merely the tools for earning money for companies. Participant F suspects some foundations are involved in fraud. She said a foundation once stole their organisation's photo to make crowdfunding for another organisation. She doubted if that organisation really existed: "if it is a real animal organisation, why do they use our photos instead of theirs?" Foundations can also get commissions from some crowdfunding platforms and animal organisations cannot get all of the donations. Participant F advises donors to donate food directly to organisations instead of using crowdfunding platforms. In fact, corruption and fraud in the charity sector of China have always been a problem. The charity work and crowdfunding often face a "general distrust" issue among the public (Sidel, 2025; Chow, 2025). In the 2010s, some corruption scandals that involved big charities, including the state-affiliated Red Cross Society, struck the charity sector that has developed rapidly since 2008 Sichuan earthquake. The scandals related to foundations are numerous. For example, in 2024, the China Charities Aid Foundation for Children was involved in donation fraud. The public's trust to foundations have been extremely low (Chow, 2025). Although the Charity Law and its amendments aim to regulate the charity sector, fraud is still a big problem (Sidel, 2025, p. 545). According to Chow (2025), bureaucratic control over charities in China is increasing. It is hard to say if the state involvement could reduce or exacerbate corruption frauds in foundations. Participant C's organisation has not chosen to deal with foundations. They actively participate in charity events organised by many shopping malls in Shanghai. They could sell their handmade products at events and communicate with potential donors directly. Sometimes they can also find adopters in the events. However, participant C said the events have become less beneficial in recent years because of the economic downturn in China. People become more careful with the money they spend. Many animal organisations have turned to online and offline businesses related to pet market to financially support their

organisations, but the revenue is not enough to cover their cost. Besides, getting involved in business makes their status ambiguous. The public doubts whether they are charities or private small businesses, which affects their crowdfunding.

- Insufficient public education on animal protection

If the lack of legal framework and limited support from the authority and foundations are top-down drawbacks for animal organisations, then the unsupportive attitude of some ordinary people is a bottom-up blow to volunteers and activists. During the interview, some participants believed this situation is caused by the lack of public education on animal protection. Participants D and E's organisations have made efforts to advocate for protecting animals.

Participant A has one cat shelter that is located in the apartment owned by one of the co-founders. When I visited this place last summer, I found that they had kept the apartment clean. Before I went inside, I could not tell if this apartment had been used as shelter. Most neighbours have no objection to them having cats inside the building. However, one of the neighbours was furious after knowing that they have kept rescued cats inside. He kept on harassing volunteers in order to force them to move out. This kind of problem is common among animal organisations. Participant D's organisation used to have premises in a private apartment. After being objected by neighbors, they rented another commercial place. Even so, they are still having a hard time. The property management company of the commercial place is not friendly to participant D's organisation. In D's words, they "pick on us from time to time" (时不时找我们麻烦). If the volunteers put a cleaned cage at the gate, the staff from the property management company will ask volunteers to get it in for fire alarm safety, but they do not care if the nearby restaurants put chairs outside. Participant D once had a quarrel with them and asked them to "be kind to animals" (对动物有点爱心).

In addition to the offline conflicts, the online attacks to animal volunteers and activists also have negative impacts on their emotions and cause burnout. Participant F said that social media has helped them attract more potential donors, but the attacks on social media are the side effect. Some platforms are relatively friendly while others are full of hostility. They choose to focus on friendly platforms and ignore the negative comments. Participant E has been active on many social media platforms. He has received countless negative comments, such as "why are you being so nice to animals instead of people...Are you using animals to

make money?” He refuted these comments by publishing on social media his donation to primary schools in the countryside of Southwestern China. He has also calculated and published his financial investment of rescuing animals in the last few years, which is millions of yuan. It is impossible that he could get any financial profits from rescuing. Participant E believes some people are just hostile and do not actually care if he rescues animals or people. Being active on social media, however, has made his organisation the target of some animal abusers. There was one time that abusers planned to visit the shelter and secretly harm their cats. Their plan was discovered by activists who went undercover in abusers’ social media groups. Later, they called the police, and the police said they cannot arrest the abusers now because they have not conducted the plan. However, if the abusers do come to the organisation, the police said they could come “within ten minutes” and arrest them in the name of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (寻衅滋事). All the volunteer workers in the organisation were anxious during that time because they worried the abusers might take revenge on them. Some other organisations have also been targeted by abusers who wanted to poison the animals in the shelter.

Animal abuse, as explained in the previous chapters, has become a serious problem in China. Until now, no animal abusers have been sentenced to jail if their actions are not harmful to humans. The man who poisoned pet dogs and got a 4-year sentence has used the poison harmful to humans. Besides, the pet owner who is famous for suing this man has received threat messages from other animal abusers (Zhang, 2026).

Participant D’s organisation has been active on combating animal abusers. In January, they had a success and made an animal abuser get 7 days of administrative detention (行政拘留), which is the best result that animal activists can get. Sometimes the police are not motivated to deal with animal abuse cases. Activists have to find other reasons to report the abusers to the police, such as spreading bloody videos online or damaging others’ belongings (pets are regarded as belongings). The tactics of combating animal abuse is important. Offline demonstrations are impossible. They have to use social media and find the “legal way” to punish abusers effectively. The founder of D’s organisation sometimes consults lawyers about the issue. Combating animal abusers has not been an easy task for them.



Picture 4. A signed board that advocates animal welfare in participant D's organisation. Photo: Lu Niu.

Participant D's organisation has also organised special events that welcome the public to visit their shelters. They hope this could raise public awareness of animal protection. Many volunteers and activists have complained that some people have limited knowledge of raising pets. There are also people who abandon their pets when their family has a newborn human baby because they think pets are “dirty” and harm babies' health. Animal activists try to educate the public about how to “raise pets in a scientific way” (科学喂养) so that pets stay healthy and not “dirty”. They also hope the public realise companion animals are part of the family that should not be abandoned. Participant E has made some videos about animal welfare and published on his social media account to raise public awareness. He believes that transforming his shelter into a cat cafe is also a good way to educate the public:

**Participant #E:** If children come here, learn about and develop responsibility and care for animals, they will be able to pass that on to the next generation in the future. Generation after generation, it will be like a seed that takes root and grows because it started here with us.

## 6.2.2 Internal causes: the normalisation of burnout and unrealistic goals

Based on the interview with six participants, I found that many animal volunteers and activists have normalised the burnout. The reason is that animal organisations are always in difficult situations due to the external causes mentioned above. Therefore, they believe entering into the animal charity means you are prepared for burnout. Participant F said that as long as you are rescuing animals, you will definitely feel burnout. This observation is similar

to the “martyr syndrome” among some volunteers and activists in the European and US context (Gorski, 2015). They regard self-care as “indulgence” and cannot say “no” to the work that has reached their limits and caused burnout (Gorski, 2015, p. 707). In the existing research, the martyr syndrome brings conflicts between the management team and grassroots volunteers or activists in the organisation. In my research, the interview data has not shown whether the normalisation of burnout has caused conflicts inside the organisations. However, it reduces volunteers and activists’ attention to the burnout and is often connected to their unrealistic goals for rescuing animals. Participant A said she has witnessed numerous people who get involved in animal rescue without thinking about their ability. Participant B has witnessed similar things. She said some volunteers are “burning themselves out” (燃尽自己) and have the “individual heroism” (个人英雄主义) mindset. There are always new stray animals, but volunteers should realise that they cannot save all of them. Participant B hopes that animal volunteers could know how to take care of themselves, so that they can have the energy to take care of animals. Participant E has recorded a video and posted on social media about being careful before rescuing animals, because it means huge financial and physical investments. Exceeding one’s ability to rescue can be harmful to both humans and animals.

### 6.2.3 In-movement causes: potential conflicts in the organisation

The existing volunteer and activist burnout scholarship has taken the conflicts inside the organisation as part of the reasons for burnout (Gorski, 2019a; 2019b). According to my interview, the participants have not talked about any conflicts in the organisations. Perhaps it is out of politeness that they do not want to talk behind one’s back. When I was doing volunteer work, I observed that there were still some disagreements or chaos that were not as serious as conflicts, but caused extra work for volunteers and activists. For example, the long-term volunteers complained about temporary volunteers unfamiliar with their tasks.

Temporary volunteers might even mix ill animals with healthy animals, which is extremely dangerous. Some long-term volunteers have to spend extra time fixing the mistakes made by temporary volunteers. Participant F’s organisation has refused some donors who want to come to do volunteer work for a few days, because it’s impossible for them to help with anything in only a few days. It takes time to be familiar with the work in the organisation. They welcome them to visit, but doing volunteer work needs to be decided cautiously. This kind of situation also happens online. The organisation I volunteered once built a group chat on WeChat to combat an animal abuser in a nearby city. Volunteers, activists, donors and

other people who pay attention to the incident have all joined in. They established the group chat with the aim of getting support from as many people as possible. However, the group chat gradually became chaotic. Some people kept on spamming the chat with their anger to animal abuse instead of following the instructions of the activists. A few people used this chat to find adopters for their own rescued animals. Some pet product dealers have also joined in and advertised for their products, and were later kicked out from the group chat by activists. In the end, most of the crucial work was still done by essential activists. Managing a group chat with large numbers of people became extra work for them. Working in an animal organisation still requires cooperation and sometimes management skills. Otherwise, the chaos or even conflicts inside the organisation could make volunteers and activists even more exhausted.

### **6.3 Measures and impacts**

The participants of this research are aware of their burnout related to their work at the animal organisation. Some of them prefer to divert attention to other things for relief. Participant A said she likes to chant Buddhist scriptures to get inner peace. Participant B used to focus on any other things that she is interested in so that she can have a good rest. Participant C enjoys chatting with friends or family. Participant F said she used to suffer from reading negative comments on social media. Now she has learnt to ignore them, which relieves her burnout a lot. The special case in this research is from participant E. He once got trauma and severe burnout because of rescuing animals. He had to turn to psychologist for help. However, these measures could only relieve, not prevent the burnout. According to the participants in this research, they suggest not accepting any new animals if the organisation has reached its limits. For the individual volunteers and activists, withdrawing from animal charity is an understandable choice. Participant A and D's organisations have been very careful with accepting new animals. Participant B has withdrawn from animal charity and focuses on the remaining animals that have not found adoption families yet. Participant C said her organisation has been on the edge of bankruptcy. They have barely accepted new animals in the last year. Participant F's organisation is currently troubled by the limited space of the shelter. They have been cautious of accepting new animals too. As participant A has expressed in the interview, she has gone through the phase of devoting herself to rescuing as many animals as possible. Now she often advises other volunteers to "let it go" (劝人看开).

The burnout among animal volunteers and activists makes them reduce rescuing new animals and even withdraw from animal charity. These measures are the forced choice that volunteers and activists have to make in the face of difficult situation. Since the number of stray animals in cities increases with the pet market, many people join the animal charity domain and many people leave because of the difficult situation. The turnover rate of animal volunteers and activists remains high. Many animal organisations close within a few years. As long as there is no essential change, such as the legislation and law enforcement, the current unsustainable way of developing animal organisations and being animal volunteer/activist will persist.

## 7 Conclusion and discussion

By interviewing Chinese animal volunteers/activists and observation through fieldwork, this research reveals that burnout is common among animal volunteers and activists. Based on Paul Gorski's categorisation of burnout causes, the analysis of data in this research shows that external causes, which relate to the social and political situation in China, have been the essential cause of their burnout. The difficult situation of animal organisations is not the malfunction of one part, but the systemic dysfunction of companion animal management in China. At the origin, there is no legislation for the management of companion animals. Companion animals' legal status is not recognised in current law. The behaviour of pet breeders and pet owners is not regulated. Black market of dog and cat meat has also created a lot of animals that need to be rescued. As a result, the number of stray animals increases rapidly, which becomes the burden on animal organisations. The workload for animal volunteers and activists increases. They also must find suitable premises to shelter large numbers of animals. Meanwhile, finding suitable adopters for the animals is difficult because no legislation can regulate adopters' behaviour. It is difficult to build trust between animal volunteers and adopters. There are cases where some animal abusers have even pretended to be adopters. The lack of relevant legislation and inadequate law enforcement have made animal abuse a serious problem in China right now.

As for the operations of animal organisations, they entirely depend on themselves. The support from authorities and foundations is quite limited. The grassroots civil servants are not motivated to support animal organisations. The registration process for animal organisations is complicated and exhausting. After registration, the animal organisation barely get more support than before. Therefore, even those that have registered successfully may give up renewing the registration. Foundations cannot solve the problems for animal organisations either. The aim of foundations sometimes does not fit with that of animal organisations. The corruption scandals have reduced animal organisations' willingness to cooperate. Apart from donations, many animal organisations start small businesses online or offline to relieve the financial burden. However, the revenue could not cover their cost and their status became ambiguous. The public doubts whether they are charities or private small businesses, which affects their crowdfunding.

If the lack of legal framework and limited support from the authority and foundations are top-down drawbacks for animal organisations, the unsupportive attitude of many people in society

is an obstacle from the grassroots. Many animal organisations have encountered unfriendly attitudes from others nearby and received negative comments online. Animal volunteers and activists believe the lack of public education about animal protection is the reason. Some activists have taken actions to educate the public about how to take care and get along with companion animals.

In the face of this difficult situation, many animal volunteers and activists believe that the burnout is normal. They believe entering into the animal charity means you are prepared for burnout. This normalisation of burnout reduces their attention to self-care, which is similar to the “martyr syndrome” that exists in existing burnout research. Some have set unrealistic goals for animal rescuing. These are categorised as the internal causes of burnout among animal volunteers and activists.

The in-movement causes, which are related to the conflicts inside the organisations, have not been talked about directly by participants. However, through my fieldwork, I found that there are still some management chaos and disagreements that could increase the workload for volunteers and activists.

The measures taken by animal volunteers/activists to relieve burnout, such as diverting attention and ignoring negative comments, could relieve to some extent but not solve their problems totally. A common way to solve their problems is to reduce accepting new animals or not accept at all. Besides, many volunteers and activists may choose to quit if they cannot sustain anymore. As a result, the turnover rate of volunteers and activists is high, and many organisations could only exist for a few years. The current model of animal charity is not sustainable.

## **7.1 Discussion**

In this research, the findings that external causes are essential for Chinese animal volunteers/activists burnout support the argument that analysing the current situation of animal welfare and animal cruelty in China should emphasize the political and social factors, instead of solely taking the cultural explanations. As the pet market is thriving in China and relevant problems increase, animal organisations are delivering the public services that the state has not been efficient in providing. Therefore, the animal organisations have been tolerated and got space to develop. However, that space is still limited. Activists can speak out for companion animals’ welfare on social media, but only moderately. Offline demonstrations

and protests are prohibited. Meanwhile, the Charity Law and Overseas NGO Laws have limited the sources of funding. The registration under the Ministry of Civil Affairs is still complicated and often takes very long time. Besides, the animal management is not an important factor of cadre performance evaluation, compared to economic development and employment. Therefore, many grassroots civil servants are not motivated to support the animal organisations.

Many volunteers and activists believe that if China has a comprehensive animal protection law, the current situation of companion animals could be changed. However, the enforcement of law needs to be considered. With the Charity Law and its amendments in 2023, there is still corruption and fraud in charity sector. The enforcement of tackling black meat market and animal abuse is also inadequate. Peter Li's exploration of this topic (2021) reveals that the black meat market dealers are mostly unskilled workers who might be peasants who lost land or laid-off workers. Punishing them harshly could damage their livelihood, which causes social unrest. Participant B told me the same thing. She said after being a trainee lawyer, she realised that the Ministry of Agriculture has already published guidance for pet industry, such as "Kitten feeding and management Guidance" and "Guideline for diagnosis and treatment service of pet medical institutions". These guidelines are not legally binding. The people working in the pet industry, such as pet breeders, are mostly disadvantaged and vulnerable. It is impossible to punish them unless they have done something that has "a high degree of social harm" (社会危害性大). The punishment to black meat market dealers is only limited to their lack of "inspection and quarantine certificate" (检验检疫证书), which conforms to Peter Li's findings. Therefore, whether a comprehensive animal protection law could solve all the problems requires further discussion.

For animal volunteers and activists, self-care is important. The animal organisations could also provide guidance to new volunteers and activists, helping them realise the challenges of their work and set realistic goals. Professionalism is also important for animal organisations. For example, long-term volunteers could provide training to new or temporary volunteers to prevent chaos inside the organisation. Animal activists' usage of social media requires skills too. Social media has been an important channel for animal organisations to communicate with the public and attract potential donors. The application of social media of animal organisations deserves further research.

## 7.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is the potential bias in expert interviews. I have only found six participants in this research. For some of their answers, I could not do the cross-checking. Besides, my time spent on fieldwork was not long, so that my observation in the animal organisation is limited and could not help preventing the potential bias from expert interviews.

The too-short fieldwork is a serious limitation of this research. There are many aspects, such as conflicts inside the animal organisations, that participants might not talk about in the interviews. The longer staying at the organisation, the more unexpected incidents I would be able to encounter. My short stay also makes it difficult to build enough trust with other volunteers and activists. Meanwhile, the geographical impacts on different animal organisations also require observations from myself.

The interviews solely depending on instant messaging app is another limitation in this research. It would be ideal if I could find participants who attend real-time interviews and compare the interview data between these two methods.

A further challenge for this research was the limited trust that I have built with some of the participants in this research. The interview answers that they typed in the document are not in-depth, therefore I need to ask many follow-up questions when we communicate in WeChat. However, I have to find a balance between getting information from them and not being intrusive. Some of my data lacks the depth because I have to keep this balance.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 Interview Questions in Chinese

#### 第一部分: 基本信息

- 1: 您的年龄是多少? 或者您也可以给我一个大致年龄段
- 2: 您的性别是?
- 3: 您目前的状态是? (例如: 在读学生、公司/事业单位在职、自主创业、自由职业、退休)
- 4: 如果方便的话, 您可否告诉我您的最高学历是什么?
- 5: 您目前进行救助工作的所在地是?
- 6: 您可否简单介绍一下您目前所处的流浪动物救助组织(例如: 成立时间、规模、工作与管理模式、资金来源)

#### 第二部分: 流浪动物救助经历

- 1: 您当初是如何进入流浪动物救助这一领域的? 您进入这一领域的契机或原因是什么?
- 2: 您如何描述您目前所从事的流浪动物救助工作? 您主要专注于哪些方面?
- 3: 流浪动物救助在您的生活中扮演着怎样的角色? 您是全职从事流浪动物救助, 还是在工作/学习之余救助流浪动物?
- 4: 您认为现在的救助工作存在哪些困难?
- 5: 您认为目前最需要何种帮助与支持来应对这些困难?

#### 第三部分: 草根流浪动物救助者的社会活动者倦怠

- 1: 您是否听说过“社会活动者倦怠”?

——如果是, 在救助流浪动物的过程中, 您曾经历过何种程度的倦怠

——如果不是，在救助流浪动物的过程中，您曾产生何种程度的负面情绪（如：倦怠/焦虑/精疲力尽/悲观等）或遭遇怎样的身体健康问题？

2: 这些负面情绪/身体健康问题具体如何影响到您的救助工作以及日常生活？

3: 您是如何从中缓解的？

4: 根据您的观察，这些负面情绪/身体健康问题在流浪动物救助者中常见吗？他们是如何缓解的？

5: 您认为目前救助工作存在的困难是造成这些负面情绪/身体健康问题的主要原因吗？

——如果是，您可否举一些实际的例子？

——如果不是，您认为造成这些负面情绪/身体健康问题的主要原因是什么？

6: 您认为还有哪些因素会给救助者带来负面情绪/身体健康问题？

7: 在您看来，救助者的负面情绪/身体健康问题是否广泛存在于流浪动物救助领域？该如何解决这个问题？

8: 最后，关于流浪动物救助，您还有什么想告诉我的？

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## **Appendix 2 Interview Questions in English**

### **Part One: Basic Information**

- 1: How old are you? You could give me an approximate decade if you'd prefer.
- 2: What is the gender with which you identify?
- 3: What is your current occupation? (For example: student, employee, entrepreneur, freelancer, retiree)
- 4: Would you mind telling me your educational background?
- 5: Where is the stray animal help group you are working with?
- 6: Could you please briefly introduce your stray animal help group?

### **Part Two: Animal Volunteer Experience**

- 1: How and why did you initially get involved in animal volunteer work?
- 2: How would you characterize the animal volunteer work that you do? Are there particular issues on which you focus most intently?
- 3: What kind of role has animal volunteer work played in your life? Are you involved in it on a full-time basis, or do you participate in it in addition to your work or studies?
- 4: What difficulties do you think exist in the current animal volunteer work?
- 5: In your opinion, what kinds of support are needed for tackling the difficulties?

### **Part Three: Volunteer and Activist Burnout among Grassroots Animal Volunteers and Activists**

- 1: Have you ever heard of the term "volunteer and activist burnout"?
  - If yes, to what extent have you experienced this related to your animal volunteer work?
  - If no, to what extent have you experienced emotional exhaustion (such as being anxious, exhausted and cynical) and physical exhaustion related to your animal volunteer work?
- 2: How has the emotional and physical exhaustion of burnout affected you, specifically?

3: How do you make it through?

4: To what extent do you see burnout among grassroots animal volunteers and activists? How do they make it through?

5: Do you think the difficulties of animal volunteer work are the main reasons for burnout?

-- If yes, could you provide me with some examples?

-- If no, what are the main reasons that cause burnout?

6: What are the other factors that cause burnout?

7: In your opinion, is burnout a serious problem for animal volunteer work in general? How could it be mitigated?

8: Is there anything else about animal volunteer work that you feel is important for me to know?