

Building Social Resilience from Below

*Everyday Practices and Informal Governance in Cunxin
Benevolent Hall, China*

Zihan Yu

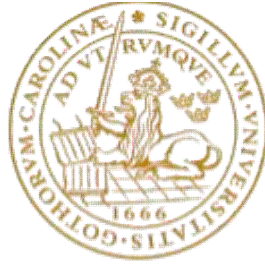
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Abstract

In times of public crises, state-centered governance often faces delayed response and limited local reach, leaving gaps that formal institutions alone cannot fill. It is precisely in these gaps that informal organizations and community networks become critical—yet how such organizations sustain grassroots resilience across both ordinary times and moments of crisis remains underexplored. My thesis examines Cunxin Benevolent Hall, a long-standing charitable organization in Shantou, China, to understand how social resilience is built beyond formal institutions. Combining the perspectives of institutional complementarity and community resilience, and drawing on interviews, participant observation, and archival materials, the study analyzes both state–society interaction and internal organizational mechanisms. I find that resilience emerges from everyday practices— routine care, moral mobilization, and trust-based networks—that accumulate into mobilizable capacity during crises. My study argues that informal organizations sustain resilience by embedding governance in daily life, while also revealing the individual costs underlying this process.

Keywords: community resilience; informal organizations; institutional complementarity; grassroots governance; everyday practices; China

Word count: 11997

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When I was young, even traveling to the city for school once felt unimaginably far away. I could never have imagined that one day I would cross continents to study in Sweden. Now, this thesis marks the end of my student years. In the end, I chose to return to my hometown to complete it. Somehow, that feels meaningful to me — as though I have drawn a great circle through these years and finally arrived back where I began. Yet returning to the starting point does not feel like an ending. Instead, it feels like the place from which another journey quietly begins.

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1 Introduction

In the context of sudden public events such as natural disasters and public health emergencies, hierarchical governance systems centered on the state often face problems of delayed response, high coordination costs, and insufficient last-mile coverage—leaving dispersed and rapidly changing grassroots needs, from relief distribution to the protection of vulnerable groups, inadequately addressed (Gao & Yu, 2020). At a deeper level, crises are not merely shocks to existing governance systems, but rather concentrated manifestations of structural fissures that have accumulated in everyday governance over time (Polese & Helou, 2024). The COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan offers a telling example: official supply chains faced severe bottlenecks, with donations piling up in warehouses and patients navigating multiple layers of administrative approval before hospital admission. These were not failures created by the pandemic, but longstanding rigidities in bureaucratic coordination and resource allocation that the crisis brought sharply into view (Fang et al., 2021). Governance, therefore, should not be understood simply as emergency response, but as an ongoing process of maintaining the capacity for social functioning across both routine and exceptional conditions (Gilson et al., 2020). From the perspective of social-ecological resilience, the key issue is not only how societies respond to crises once they occur, but also how adaptive capacities are continuously maintained, reproduced, and mobilized under conditions of uncertainty and recurring disturbance (Folke et al., 2010).

Studies suggest that collaborative networks composed of government agencies, social organizations, and community actors can absorb external shocks and sustain the basic functioning of social systems during crises (Zhang et al., 2016; Hu et al., 2014). Research on events such as the Wenchuan earthquake, the Lushan earthquake, and the COVID-19 pandemic further shows that social organizations often play intermediary and coordinating roles in disaster relief, resource allocation, and post-disaster recovery (Lu et al., 2020; Lian et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021). A smaller body of research has begun to examine how local relationships contribute to the accumulation of collaborative capacity before and after crises, drawing on perspectives of social capital and community networks (Shirleyana et al., 2023; Erwin et al., 2023; Paudel et al., 2024). These findings suggest that social organizations are not merely supplementary actors outside the formal state system, but actors involved in the everyday reproduction of grassroots resilience — their role is evident not only in rapid responses during crises, but also in the continuous absorption of risk in everyday contexts. However, within the Chinese context, existing research tends to focus on the interaction between government and social organizations during crises (Liu et al., 2021; Tang et al.,

2018), and pays comparatively less attention to how social organizations themselves sustain their operations and where their operational capacity originates.

This study takes the Cunxin Benevolent Hall in Shantou as a case of how informal organizations sustain community resilience beyond formal institutional arrangements. Founded in 1899, the organization provides funeral services, medical assistance, material distribution, and emergency mobilization in Shantou and surrounding areas, maintaining a complex relationship with grassroots government that is neither fully dependent nor entirely detached. This study introduces two analytical perspectives: institutional complementarity and community resilience. I use institutional complementarity to examine how the benevolent hall and grassroots government form functional divisions and negotiate the boundaries of operational scope, resource allocation, and service delivery between formal and informal actors between formal and informal actors, and community resilience to understand how this relationship remains stable through continuous shifts between crisis response and everyday assistance. I argue that the role of informal networks in grassroots governance is not simply a functional supplement authorized by formal institutions, but rather a process of continuous reproduction grounded in endogenous resources, local embeddedness, and everyday practices. The value of the benevolent hall lies not only in its capacity for mobilization during crises, but also in its ability to sustain grassroots society in a state of constant readiness through everyday accumulation.

Based on this, my study proposes three interrelated research questions:

- How is the interaction between the Cunxin Benevolent Hall and grassroots government formed and maintained?
- In the absence of formal bureaucratic support, through what mechanisms does the organization sustain internal cohesion, cross-regional coordination, and thus builds community resilience?
- What structural relationship exists between its everyday practices and its crisis response?

Through the analysis of this case, the study aims to provide a more micro-level and process-oriented empirical explanation for understanding state–society interaction and the everyday production of grassroots social resilience in the Chinese context.

2 Literature Review

The role of social organizations in crisis governance has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly as state-centered governance systems continue to encounter difficulties in responding to complex and rapidly changing public emergencies (Gao & Yu, 2020; Fang et al., 2021). Existing studies have shown that collaborative networks composed of government agencies, social organizations, and community actors can partially compensate for the structural limitations of formal administrative systems and play important roles in emergency response, resource coordination, and post-disaster recovery (Hu et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2020; Lian et al., 2021).

Much of this research, however, approaches social organizations primarily from a structural perspective. Scholars have either examined how institutional arrangements shape the participation space of social organizations (Liu et al., 2021), or used social network analysis to analyze inter-organizational connectivity and information flows (Chen et al., 2019; Du et al., 2020). As a result, existing studies tend to focus more on the external structure of collaborative governance than on the internal operation of organizations themselves.

Building on this limitation, some scholars have shifted attention toward informal networks and social capital. Existing studies show that when governments become overloaded or governance systems fail, informal networks based on neighborhood assistance and acquaintance ties can quickly fill functional gaps (Xu et al., 2022; Lian & Shaw, 2025). In the Chinese context, these “guanxi”-based relations, shaped by reciprocal obligation and reputational constraint, are more likely to transform external crises into internally recognized public responsibilities (Wei & Han, 2018; Liu & Wen, 2021; Barbalet, 2023). This suggests that the effectiveness of informal networks during crises lies not simply in their existence, but in the fact that they are deeply embedded within local structures of trust.

At the same time, existing studies on Chinese Benevolent Halls, which are traditional grassroots charitable organizations rooted in local belief systems and community networks and particularly active in southern China, have largely developed along a similar direction. One group of studies focuses on how Benevolent Hall obtain institutional space within the state governance system, examining their interactions with grassroots governments and the boundaries of their actions (Chen, 2021; Zhou, 2009). Another group of studies pays more attention to how Benevolent Hall improve emergency rescue capacity and social mobilization efficiency through organizational development and institutionalization (Hou et al., 2024). These studies are important for understanding the institutional position and governance functions of Hall organizations. However, their analytical focus

still remains concentrated on state–society relations and crisis response. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how these organizations sustain long-term operation internally, why members continue to participate over time, and how such participation is accumulated and transformed into practical response capacity through everyday activities.

As a result, an important gap remains in the existing literature. Most studies pay close attention to organizational action during moments of crisis, but pay less attention to how these capacities are produced and maintained during ordinary times. In fact, community resilience is not a quality that suddenly emerges during disasters; rather, it is an adaptive resource embedded within everyday relationships and routine practices of management (Norris et al., 2008). Cross-national evidence similarly suggests that the governance value of informal organizations is often rooted in their continuous interaction with local society through everyday micro-level practices such as prayer, resource sharing, and social support (Uddin et al., 2020; Williams, 2022; Okyere, 2024). Observations from Chinese cases by Fang Ying et al. (2021) and Zhang et al. (2022) further support this argument: rapid responses during the early stages of crises fundamentally depend on the institutional stickiness and social relationship networks accumulated through routine operations in ordinary times.

In sum, while existing research has acknowledged the value of informal networks in governance, there remains a lack of systematic, mechanism-based explanation for how traditional grassroots charitable organizations—characterized by historical continuity, belief systems, and deep community embeddedness—sustain themselves within China’s specific state–society context, and how they transform everyday care practices into resilience resources capable of responding to large-scale crises. The operational logic of such organizations cannot be reduced to authorization by formal institutions, nor can it be understood as purely spontaneous networks. Rather, it must be examined through the continuous interaction between routine and exceptional conditions. For this reason, this study takes the Cunxin Benevolent Hall in Shantou as a case, and, drawing on the perspectives of adaptive governance and institutional complementarity, analyzes how this century-old grassroots organization translates everyday practices into grassroots social resilience through long-term interaction with local government.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Grassroots Social Resilience

The development of resilience research provides the conceptual basis for understanding this case. Holling (1973) first used resilience to describe the ability of ecosystems to maintain their structure and function under disturbance. Later, Folke (2006) and others incorporated human activities into the analysis and extended resilience to a broader social– ecological system. This shift breaks the linear narrative of crisis and recovery. It treats resilience as a process that evolves through continuous interaction, rather than a one-time rebound after a shock (Folke, 2006). Building on this idea, Norris et al. (2008) argue that resilience is not a feature activated only in moments of crisis. Instead, it depends on flexibility, redundancy, and collective capacity accumulated in everyday life.

This argument directly shapes the focus of my study. If resilience develops in daily life, then I should not only ask who responds when a crisis occurs. I also need to ask who, in ordinary times, builds this capacity and through what kinds of practices. The case of Cunxin Benevolent Hall becomes meaningful in this sense. It does not appear only as an emergency organization during disasters. It continuously participates in grassroots society through daily relief, resource circulation, and community care. Through these activities, it accumulates the capacity to deal with disturbances overtime.

Therefore, this study shifts the analysis of resilience to the level of grassroots society and understands grassroots social resilience as a process through which local society continuously produces the resources and capacities needed to respond to disturbances through specific organisations and everyday practices. This definition does not mainly emphasise a system's ability to recover after a shock. Instead, it focuses on how the conditions that make recovery possible are continuously maintained in everyday life.

Unlike studies such as Gilson et al. (2020), which focus on everyday resilience within formal organisations, this study asks a different question: when the actors involved are not employees within formal institutions, but members of informal networks who participate without pay, how do the mechanisms and costs of this everyday accumulation take shape differently? Based on this question, the following sections introduce the perspective of institutional complementarity to analyse the structural conditions that allow this capacity to emerge.

3.2 Institutional Complementarity: The Formation of Structural Relations

Scholars usually understand institutions as rule arrangements that constrain behavior and stabilize expectations (Barbalet, 2023). Formal institutions take the form of laws, policies, and administrative procedures, and the state creates and enforces them through official channels. Informal institutions, in contrast, are unwritten rules that people widely share and follow in society. They often come from customs, traditions, social norms, and relational networks, and they rely on reputation, social obligation, and pressure for enforcement (Barbalet, 2023). Scott (2014) further identifies three pillars of institutions: the regulatory pillar, which includes laws and sanctions; the normative pillar, which defines appropriate behavior; and the cultural–cognitive pillar, which refers to shared understandings that people take for granted. Formal rescue systems mainly rely on the regulatory pillar, while traditional social organizations draw more on the normative and cultural–cognitive pillars for mobilization.

The core idea of institutional complementarity is that different institutional arrangements do not operate in isolation. They interact and jointly shape governance outcomes. The effect of one institution often depends on the presence of another (Amable, 2016). In public crisis governance, formal institutions provide legal authority and administrative resources (Mao, 2021). Informal institutions provide local knowledge, trust networks, and rapid mobilization (Nikkanen et al., 2024). Their functional combination allows grassroots governance to achieve tasks that neither side can complete alone.

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) offer a typology to identify these relationships. They show that the interaction between formal and informal institutions depends on two dimensions: whether formal institutions function effectively, and whether informal institutions produce outcomes consistent with formal goals. When formal institutions work well and informal institutions help achieve the same goals while covering areas they cannot reach, the relationship is complementary. When formal institutions fail and informal institutions take over their functions, the relationship becomes substitutive. In this study, I do not fix Cunxin Benevolent Hall in one category. Instead, I use this framework to show that the relationship is dynamic. When formal rescue mechanisms have not yet started, the organization may take a substitutive role. As formal systems begin to operate, it shifts into a complementary position. The relationship between formal and informal institutions moves with the situation rather than staying fixed.

However, institutional complementarity mainly addresses a structural question. It explains how different institutions form functional relations. It does not fully explain how these relations persist overtime, or how Cunxin Benevolent Hall maintains its organizational capacity across repeated shifts between crisis and normal conditions. This limitation leads me to introduce adaptive governance.

3.3 Adaptive Governance: The Maintenance of Process

Adaptive governance developed from the study of complex social–ecological systems. It focuses on how governance systems continue to operate under high uncertainty and frequent disturbances (Folke et al., 2005). This approach questions the assumption of a single optimal stable state. It argues that complex systems do not always move toward equilibrium, and governance should not aim to maintain a fixed order. Instead, it should build the capacity to respond to change through continuous learning and institutional adjustment (Hatfield-Dodd et al., 2007).

In recent years, scholars have applied this perspective to public crisis management and cross-sector collaboration (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020). They often identify several institutional features that support adaptive capacity. These include polycentric governance, where multiple actors participate in decision-making and reduce overall risk through local experimentation (Huiteima et al., 2009); bridging organizations, which connect different institutional domains (Schultz et al., 2015); and feedback-based learning, where governance processes include continuous evaluation and adjustment (Folke et al., 2005).

In this study, I use adaptive governance to understand Cunxin Benevolent Hall as a process rather than a fixed structure. During crises, it acts as a bridging organization. It mobilizes resources quickly through cross-boundary connections and works with the government. In everyday life, it maintains its operation through daily relief, resource circulation, and faith-based mobilization. These two states do not stand apart. They connect through the trust and capacity built in everyday practice.

From a theoretical perspective, these three concepts correspond to the core questions raised in the introduction. Institutional complementarity is used to examine how the relationship between the benevolent hall and the grassroots state is formed and maintained. Adaptive governance helps explain how the organization sustains coordination and adjusts its practices across different situations. Resilience, meanwhile, provides the broader perspective for understanding

how everyday practices are transformed into crisis response capacity over time. Together, these concepts form the analytical framework of this study.

4 Background

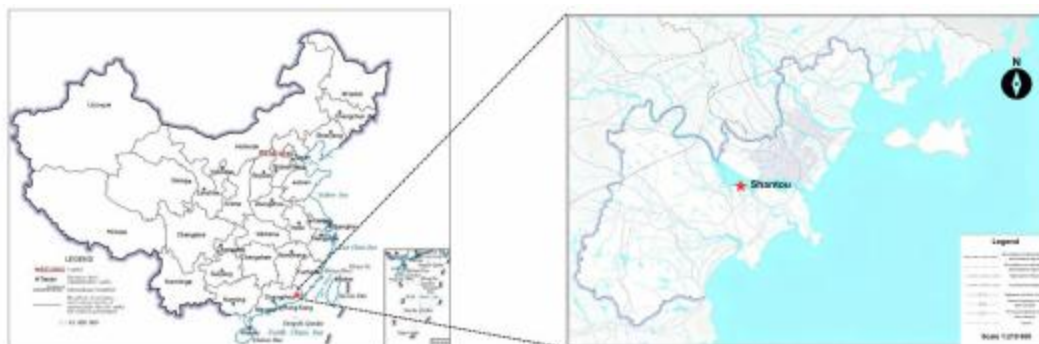


Figure 1. Study area of the present research: the Shantou City, Guangdong Province, China.

Shantou is a coastal city in southeastern Guangdong Province, China (Figure 1), and forms part of the broader Chaoshan region—an area long recognized as an important birthplace of Chaoshan culture and a place where folk charity activities remain highly active. The region is characterized by strong local identity, clan traditions, and overseas connections. Social relations have therefore long displayed a high degree of cohesion and local embeddedness. Within this social structure, practices of mutual aid and public charity have been continuously sustained (Zhou, 2009). Activities such as free herbal tea distribution, free medical treatment and medicine, and assistance for poor or vulnerable groups have long been regarded as part of everyday social life in the region.

This charitable tradition is closely connected to the long-standing local belief in Patriarch Song Dafeng. Song Dafeng was a monk during the Song Dynasty and is commonly portrayed in local narratives as a symbol of charity and humanitarian spirit. According to local historical records, he organized bridge construction, medicine distribution, relief work, and burial services during periods of disaster and social instability. Over time, he gradually became widely respected as a charitable patriarch within local society. Under this influence, the tradition of Hall gradually emerged in the Chaoshan region, with Patriarch Song Dafeng serving as a shared spiritual symbol. As time passed, this belief evolved into a localized moral practice that connected charity, merit-making, and community responsibility (Chen, 2021). For many local residents, participation in charitable work is understood not only as the provision of social services, but also as the fulfillment of a morally meaningful public responsibility.

Against this historical and social background, the Hall gradually became one of the most representative forms of local charitable organization in the Chaoshan region. Since the modern period, long-term interactions have developed among local governments, chambers of commerce, local elites, and Hall organizations. In areas such as disaster relief, public health, firefighting, and social assistance, Hall organizations have often provided supplementary services at the grassroots level, filling governance gaps that local governments could not fully cover. At the same time, overseas Chinese communities and Chaoshan communities in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan have continuously supported Hall operations through funding, reputation, and social connections. As a result, the Hall is deeply embedded in local society while also remaining connected to transregional Chinese networks (Wang & Li, 1993).



Figure 2. Interior space of Cunxin Benevolent Hall: the coexistence of ritual worship and public service. Photo taken by the author in Shantou, China, March 2026.

The Cunxin Benevolent Hall was established in 1899 and has a history of more than one hundred years (Figure 2). It remains one of the most active and influential folk charitable organizations in the Chaoshan region. In its early years, the organization mainly provided burial services, medical

assistance, water supply, emergency rescue, and public health services, gradually building strong local reputation and trust. After 1951, the organization temporarily ceased operations. Following China's reform and opening-up period, the Hall gradually resumed activities with support from local society and overseas Chaoshan communities. During the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake, the Cunxin Benevolent Hall actively participated in fundraising and volunteer rescue work, which further expanded its public influence. After 2009, the organization obtained official registration from the Shantou Civil Affairs Bureau and gradually developed a relatively stable organizational structure and service system (ShantouCunxin Benevolent Association, n.d.).

Through this long process of development, the Cunxin Benevolent Hall has gradually transformed from a folk organization rooted in local ethics and charitable traditions into a grassroots social organization that combines formal registration with deep local embeddedness. Today, its activities cover poverty relief, educational support, public rescue, medical assistance, elderly care, and disaster response. Precisely for this reason, the Cunxin Benevolent Hall provides a representative empirical case for understanding state–society interaction, the operation of informal networks, and the everyday production of social resilience in grassroots China.

5 Research Methods

5.1 Research Design and Data Sources

This study adopts a qualitative case study design and focuses on Cunxin Benevolent Hall in the Chaoshan region. I selected a case study because of the nature of the research question. I do not aim to identify general patterns. Instead, I examine how an informal organization interacts with local government in a specific social context and how it operates across both crisis and everyday situations. This type of question requires close attention to internal processes and concrete practices. It requires me to observe how institutions, trust, mobilization, and coordination actually work in local society, rather than measure variables across a large sample.

To improve reliability, I apply a triangulation strategy. I combine literature and archival materials, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes to examine the same phenomenon from different sources. The literature and archival materials include academic publications collected from Web of Science and CNKI, national and local policy documents, local gazetteers, and content published by the official WeChat account of Cunxin Benevolent Hall. I use

these materials to trace the research context, reconstruct the organizational history, and compare them with field data.

In total, I conducted nine formal interviews. Seven interviewees are members of Cunxin Benevolent Hall, and two are local government staff. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. In addition, I consulted one expert for background information. I used this consultation to better understand key concepts and the field context, but I did not include it in the formal dataset. By collecting accounts from actors in different positions, I analyze the organization from three perspectives: internal operation, government interaction, and practical collaboration.

For participant observation, I joined a rescue team after receiving an invitation from the team leader. I followed the team to a neighboring village and participated in maintaining public order during a local ritual festival. I recorded observations throughout the process. I also visited a branch of Cunxin Benevolent Hall and held an informal conversation with its manager. Due to concerns about information security, the manager refused audio recording and photography. I relied on on-site notes and later organized them into field memos. I use this material only as supporting evidence and do not rely on it alone for key conclusions.

5.2 Field Access, Sampling Strategy, Analysis Process, and Ethics

Accessing the field presented certain challenges because the study involves local informal organizations and state–society interaction. I built initial trust through local social networks, dialect communication, and ritualized interaction. During first contact, I introduced my Chaoshan background and rural identity. In the local acquaintance-based society, these elements helped reduce distance. Most conversations in the field took place in the Chaoshan dialect. Using the dialect made the interaction closer to everyday communication rather than formal academic questioning. When I entered the field during the Spring Festival, I followed local customs and brought a pair of oranges as a gift. This practice helped establish social interaction according to local norms. These actions were not designed as formal entry strategies. They reflect my own social position and mainly helped maintain familiarity rather than secure formal authorization.

For sampling, I mainly used purposive sampling, combined with snowball sampling and convenience sampling. I first accessed the organization through a key informant and then expanded the sample through referrals. This process allowed me to interview board members, rescue team leaders, and frontline volunteers. I met the branch manager during field visits through natural interaction. To

recruit grassroots government staff, I posted anonymous invitations on the social media platform Xiaohongshu. I chose this channel because the topic involves sensitive state–society relations, and formal channels rarely produce responses. Social media reduces psychological barriers for participants. In the end, two qualified civil servants contacted me and completed interviews. I provided a small time compensation for interviews, which only covered time costs and did not affect voluntary participation or the right to withdraw.

I imported all materials into the qualitative analysis software Taguette for coding. I conducted the analysis in stages. First, I used open coding to identify initial concepts related to the research questions. Second, I applied axial coding to group and connect these codes into broader categories. Finally, I compared the categories repeatedly and developed core themes for the empirical analysis. I conducted most interviews in the Chaoshan dialect, transcribed them into Mandarin, and then translated them into English during writing. I tried to preserve the original meaning and contextual details during translation. I chose manual coding instead of automated tools because I needed to remain sensitive to dialect use, local context, and organizational details.

In terms of ethics, all participants joined the study with informed consent and on a voluntary basis. I anonymized all identities and blurred details related to location, position, and personal information. The branch manager explicitly refused recording and photography due to concerns about information leakage. I respected this decision and relied only on written notes and field memos. I used this material only as supplementary evidence. As a qualitative case study, this research aims to support mechanism analysis and process tracing rather than statistical generalization.

Main Code	Initial Code	Frequency
Legitimacy Exchange	Public Recognition & Support	13
	Voluntary Service in Exchange for Recognition	8
	Institutional Identity Embeddedness	2
	Media Interviews & Documentation	9
	Government Failure	8
Government-Social Game	Boundary Conflicts	4
	Compliance & Filing Restrictions	12
	Filling Grassroots Manpower Gaps	40
	Government Failure	8

Government-Social Cooperation	Supplementary Support for Public Service Safety Net	8
	Cross-Border Information Exchange & Network Collaboration	3
Independent Resources	Financial Pressure	19
	Funding Sources	18
	Financial Management	2
	Professionalization of Rescue Teams	6
Rapid Response	Response Efficiency	14
	Personal Contributions of Members	4
Cultural-Cognitive Constraints and Driving Forces	Belief and Faith-Driven Motivation	23
	Benevolence & Dedication	11
	Team Management	12
Loose Coupling and Bonding Social Capital	Acquaintance-Based Trust	17
	Cross-Domain Bridging	13
	Informal Norms of Collaboration	3
	Network Layout	2
	Organizational Management & Structure	8
	Territoriality Principle	3
Grassroots Bottom-Line Support	Aid for Vulnerable Groups	5
	Public Emergency & Services	9
	Routine Material Assistance	14

Figure 3. Coding Results of Thematic Analysis: Main Categories, Initial Codes and Their Frequencies of Occurrence. Compiled from semi-structured interviews, participatory observation records and archival documents, this table is synthesized via thematic analysis. It illustrates the hierarchical structure of core categories and corresponding occurrence frequencies extracted from research materials, to underpin the subsequent analysis on organizational operational mechanisms.

6 Institutional Complementarity

My first research question inquires how the interactive relationship between Cunxin Benevolent Hall and grassroots government is formed and maintained? This chapter focuses on the period after the Hall obtained formal registration in 2009. Based on field interviews, organisational archives, and specific events, it examines the actual operation of this relationship in grassroots governance from the perspective of institutional complementarity. The analysis is organised around three

dimensions — functional supplementation, boundary negotiation, and resource exchange — in order to show how this dynamic relationship has been formed and sustained in practice.

6.1 Functional Substitution under Limited State Capacity

Institutional complementarity appears most directly when Cunxin Benevolent Hall takes on tasks that local governments cannot complete in time. However, this substitution does not result from formal authorization. It relies on the organization's long-term accumulation of local trust, volunteer networks, and rapid mobilization capacity. The organization can fill these gaps because it already exists as part of local society, rather than entering as an external actor during crises.

In routine civil assistance, grassroots organizations such as village committees and neighborhood committees must follow fixed procedures, including application, review, reporting, and approval. These procedures make it difficult to respond quickly. As one grassroots official explained:

“We follow a fixed workflow. For example, applying for assistance requires filling forms, review, reporting, and approval.” (Interview: community staff, March 2026)

Similarly, during disasters, the allocation of relief materials and the deployment of teams require discussion and approval from higher-level authorities. Under these conditions, the benevolent hall can often mobilize quickly once it completes basic reporting and move into action at an early stage:

“When disasters happen, they respond very quickly, even faster than government staff. They often arrive before us and handle tasks like material transport very well.” (Interview: subdistrict official, March 2026)

This speed does not come from temporary government authorization. It comes from a volunteer network that already exists in everyday life. Formal institutions operate through procedures, while informal networks respond by moving around these procedures.

In labor-intensive governance tasks, the same logic applies, but in a different form. Tasks such as searching for missing elderly people or children require large amounts of manpower, and local police stations and community staff often face shortages:

“A police station has only a few staff. How can they spend so much time and energy searching for missing people?” (Interview: deputy leader of rescue team, March 2026)

Here, the institutional gap lies not in procedural delay but in limited manpower. The benevolent hall fills this gap through long-term local relationships. Neighbors provide clues, and shop owners share surveillance footage because they know and trust the volunteers, not because the volunteers hold formal authority.

In large-scale public events such as fireworks festivals and marathons, this pattern extends further. These events often attract hundreds of thousands of people, and police forces alone cannot maintain order. As a result, local governments actively involve the benevolent hall’s rescue team as a supporting force. As one vice president noted:

“For events like marathons or fireworks shows, they come to us for help. We can send hundreds of people to support security work.” (interview, March 2026)

In these situations, local officials embed the organization into the execution of formal authority and rely on its ability to mobilize large numbers of people quickly (Ouyang, 2009). This capacity does not emerge temporarily. It develops through long-term repeated and daily operationing.

Therefore, rather than describing this phenomenon as civil society filling gaps after government failure, I interpret it as a difference in time and scale between two modes of action. Formal institutions operate through procedures, while informal networks operate through relationships. The boundary of the former lies in approval processes and staffing limits, while the boundary of the latter lies in trust radius and mobilization speed. The value of institutional complementarity rests on the trust structure that the organization has built overtime, rather than on one-sided incorporation by formal institutions.

6.2 Regulation, Compliance, and Negotiated Space

Functional complementarity does not mean that the government fully accepts the benevolent hall. While relying on its mobilization capacity, local governments also attempt to regulate and control its action boundaries through institutional means. However, these boundaries are not defined by the government alone. They are jointly shaped through ongoing interaction between

regulation and response. The government sets constraints through institutional tools, while the organization creates space through strategic compliance and, in certain situations, refuses overreaching directives by relying on its control over resources. These three layers together form an ongoing boundary negotiation in state–society relations.

At the level of regulation, the government constrains informal networks through rule-setting and organizational embedding. The benevolent hall must operate within the scope defined by civil affairs regulations and business licenses (Chen, 2021). The government also uses pre-event training, responsibility agreements, and party organization embedding to bring the organization into formal governance structures. For the benevolent hall, these arrangements act both as constraints and as protective boundaries. They define what actions are allowed and what are not, and they provide a predictable institutional space for continued participation.

In response to this system, the organization does not directly resist. Instead, it adopts strategic compliance to maintain flexibility. Reporting activities in advance becomes a strict rule:

“We must report everything in advance. We know what we can do and what we cannot do.”
(Interview: vice president, March 2026)

At the same time, the organization repeatedly emphasizes the leadership role of the government in public communication and displays official slogans at its contact points. These practices do not mean that the organization loses autonomy. Instead, they function as legitimacy management. By actively demonstrating compliance, the organization secures permission to operate within the system and maintains practical flexibility within institutional boundaries.

The licensing process of the charity clinic provides a clear example of boundary negotiation under institutional conflict. The tradition of providing free medical services has long existed in Chaoshan benevolent halls, but it faces restrictions under modern medical regulation. In 2005, Cunxin Benevolent Hall applied to establish a free clinic. The health bureau initially rejected the application based on regulatory planning requirements. Only after proposals, media attention, and coordination did the clinic receive approval (Zhou, 2009). This process shows that traditional practices do not automatically fit into modern administrative systems. They gain recognition through negotiation, regulation, and public pressure. The organization also adjusted its own form of expression to maintain space within the regulatory system.

However, strategic compliance does not mean unconditional obedience. When external directives conflict with the organization's moral responsibility to the local community, it may respond firmly by using its control over resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization refused a request to transfer locally collected supplies to other regions:

"I firmly refused to send the supplies to other provinces. I told them they could arrest me if they wanted. Everything we do is for local residents. We believe we must protect our community."

(Interview: president, March 2026)

This case shows that compliance has limits. The organization accepts boundaries, but it does not accept their unlimited expansion. Jiang (2024) describes this behavior as "reverse boundary maintenance." When administrative directives cross the organization's accepted limits, it uses its control over resources to push boundaries back. This is not simple resistance. It represents another side of boundary negotiation. Through everyday compliance, the organization builds space within the system, and this space allows it to refuse when necessary.

As a result, the boundary between the state and society is not a fixed line. Rather, it is continuously reshaped through repeated processes of discipline, adaptation, and resistance. Formal institutions establish the initial boundaries, while informal networks adjust their modes of action both within and around these limits, and in certain situations even place reverse pressure on the boundaries themselves. This process reveals a more dynamic dimension of institutional complementarity that goes beyond static structural arrangements.

6.3 Symbolic Endorsement and Reputation Exchange

The previous sections explain how the benevolent hall fills functional gaps and negotiates boundaries. A further question remains: how does this relationship persist without regular financial support?

I argue that the government replaces monetary compensation with symbolic endorsement, and the organization converts this endorsement into reputation within local society. These forms of endorsement are effective largely because the organization has already built long-term credibility within local society.

Unlike developed cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, local governments in the Chaoshan region do not provide regular financial support to the Benevolent hall (Song, 2024). Instead, they offer symbolic rewards. These include public praise in official reports, honorary titles, institutional positions for core members (such as seats in local people’s congresses), and meetings with senior officials. As one rescue team leader stated:

“We received recognition and meetings with leaders such as the provincial water bureau director and the vice mayor.” (Interview: rescue team leader, March 2026)

For informal networks at the edge of the system, such symbolic recognition is a valuable resource. The organization actively records and displays these symbols. It frequently invites local media coverage, takes photos with beneficiaries and government officials, and displays certificates, banners, and photos in prominent positions at its main hall and contact points. Through these practices, it creates a visible space of legitimacy in physical form.



Figure 4. Photographic Records of Grassroots Practices by the Volunteer Team of Cunxin Benevolent Hall. This photo wall displays activity snapshots of the Red Eagle Benevolence Volunteer Team in various scenarios, covering daily supplies distribution, community services and disaster relief operations. These continuous grassroots practices form the organization’s daily presence in local society, and underpin its social trust accumulation and mass mobilization capacity. Photo taken by the author in Shantou, China, March 2026.

The combination of political endorsement and media visibility produces a form of reputation that translates into real mobilization capacity in everyday governance. In frequent tasks such as searching for missing elderly people, the organization’s identity itself becomes a resource for accessing cooperation:

“Shop owners are willing to share surveillance footage after we explain the situation. They support us.” (Interview: rescue team leader, March 2026)

Shop owners cooperate not because the organization holds formal authority, but because they recognize and trust it. Official endorsement strengthens existing local trust rather than creating it.

As a result, the government and the organization form an asymmetric exchange. The government uses low- cost political symbols to obtain real mobilization and governance support. The organization translates top- down endorsement into reputation within local society, which helps it raise funds, mobilize volunteers, and gain cooperation. This exchange depends on the organization’s long-term moral credibility. Without this foundation, official endorsement would remain symbolic. With it, endorsement becomes a source of real governance capacity.

7. Operation: Resources, Order, and Coordination

This chapter addresses the second research question: through what mechanisms does the benevolent hall sustain internal cohesion and cross-regional coordination in the absence of formal bureaucratic support, and how do these mechanisms contribute to the production of community resilience? The previous chapter examined its external collaboration with the grassroots government. Here, the analysis turns inward and focuses on the internal conditions that support the daily functioning of this informal network. I begin with its resource base, then examine how internal constraints emerge from this base, and finally explain how cross- domain coordination becomes possible on this foundation.

7.1 Resource Pressure and Internal Compensation

The association has gradually developed a resource model based on membership fees, small recurring donations, core member subsidies, and internal mutual aid. It does not rely on government funding. From the perspective of adaptive governance, this endogenous mechanism provides the material basis for continuous adjustment under uncertainty (Akther & Evans, 2024). It reduces waiting time for formal approval, but it shifts financial pressure inward and turns it into a long-term burden for members.

In practice, regular members pay an annual fee of 25 EUR (Shantou Cunxin Charity Association, 2025). Local contact points and rescue teams rely on small recurring donations to sustain daily operation. Volunteers contribute 4 EUR per month, and rescue team members contribute 6.25 EUR per month to an equipment fund. When routine fundraising cannot cover large rescue costs, core members often step in with additional funds:

“We wait until monthly donations reach a few thousand, then I personally add tens of thousands.” (Interviewee: board member, March 2026)

This funding structure shows that the operation of the Hall relies heavily on continuous small-scale mobilisation and additional contributions from a small number of core members, rather than on stable and sufficient financial capacity. According to the organisation’s 2024 annual report, the Hall received around 0.71 million EUR in total donations that year. Among this amount, donations from individual contributors were around 80000 EUR, accounting for about 11% of the total. Another 0.47 million EUR came from the Qingsongchou online fundraising platform, but these funds were essentially part of an internal mutual-aid scheme among members rather than resources for the organisation’s everyday operations (Shantou Cunxin Benevolent Association, 2025). In other words, the funds that could actually be used for daily rescue work and public services were relatively limited. The organisation’s dependence on additional financial support from a small number of core members was therefore much greater than what the official financial figures alone might suggest.

Also, this model does not reduce cost. It redistributes cost to individuals. Members bear this burden in concrete ways. First, they face physical strain and safety risks. High-frequency and high-intensity unpaid rescue work often takes place in harsh environments:

“Sometimes we stay in disaster areas for five or six days. Our shoes remain wet, our hands and feet swell in water, we have no dry clothes, and sometimes not even a cup of hot water... It is cold, it keeps raining, and it is very hard to endure.” (Interviewee: vice president, March 2026)

Second, volunteers face pressure on their livelihoods. Long rescue missions compress their working time:

“They need to earn money to support their families... many people lose their regular jobs because of rescue work and end up doing temporary work.” (Interviewee: vice president, March 2026)

The efficiency of the informal network does not rely on spare time. It relies on continuous sacrifice of income, family life, and daily routines. Third, due to the lack of stable funding, teams face chronic shortages of professional equipment. The absence of advanced tools increases direct exposure to risk.

To cope with these pressures, the association reduces risk at the front end and absorbs cost at the back end. It has built its own training system and provides regular professional training. It also encourages core members to obtain rescue and first-aid certifications (Chen, 2021). Skills compensate for hardware limitations and reduce operational risk. At the same time, the association cooperates with online platforms to run a mutual aid program for major illnesses. Based on membership scale, it creates an internal fund pool. A member can receive up to 37,410 EUR in serious illness cases (Xu, 2017). This is not a routine benefit. It acts as a minimal safety net under conditions of high-intensity and insecure voluntary work. When members face health or financial risks, this mechanism absorbs part of the cost and reduces uncertainty.

Therefore, the organization sustains operation without salaries or contracts not because it has sufficient resources, but because it has built a system that absorbs cost and spreads risk. Yet costs do not disappear, but are moved to members, their bodies, income, and family life. Members accept this transfer because another mechanism gives meaning to this burden and makes it more sustainable for them, which leads to the next section.

7.2 Moral Mobilization and Soft Discipline

The internalization of resources resolves the material basis of the Hall's operations, yet it simultaneously generates a critical problem: when members continuously exchange their personal time, income, and health for organizational functioning, what forces sustain their commitment? This question can be disaggregated into three interrelated layers: why individuals choose to join and remain engaged, how the organization filters and retains those who continue to participate, and how internal order is restored when disagreements arise. The Hall's responses across these dimensions together constitute an internally generated order grounded in belief-based identification, flexible selection mechanisms, and endogenous authority.

The first layer means construction. By translating traditional belief into a set of morally actionable, everyday principles, the Hall provides its members with a durable source of motivation for sustained

participation. The dense tradition of popular religion in the Chaoshan region offers a cultural foundation for mobilization; however, the organization does not remain at the level of abstract religious expression. Instead, it converts these belief systems into concrete behavioral norms. For instance, in the internally circulated Ten Virtues and Hall Regulations (Figure 5), elements such as karmic retribution are retained, while values like filial piety, fraternity, loyalty, and trustworthiness are operationalized into specific expectations for volunteer conduct. Through this translation, high-intensity public service is no longer experienced merely as physical or economic depletion, but is reframed as a form of moral obligation.

“We mainly want to do good things and give back to society. People should have this purpose and devote themselves to charity.” (Interviewee: rescue team leader, March 2026)



Figure 5. Cultural Plaques and Core Norms of Cunxin Benevolent Hall. This figure exhibits three categories of core texts displayed within the hall, namely the Ancestral Master’s Admonitions, The Ten Virtues, and hall regulations. The first underpins the organization’s value foundation, the second defines codes of conduct for its members, and the third sets boundaries for practical operations. Together, these texts form the daily normative basis for the organization’s internal order. Photo taken by the author in Shantou, China, March 2026.

While meaning construction addresses the question of motivation, it does not in itself secure the stability of organizational boundaries. This leads to the second layer: flexible selection. Although the

Hall as a whole exhibits a relatively high degree of member turnover, its operational units are not characterized by disorder. Taking the rescue team as an example, the Regulations of the Cunxin Benevolent Hall Lianxia Volunteer Rescue Team (Figure 6) impose explicit constraints on member behavior, such as prohibiting the use of volunteer identity for profit-making activities. At the same time, participation frequency functions as a baseline criterion for continued membership—for instance, members who fail to participate in activities for three consecutive months are required to withdraw voluntarily.



Figure 6. Internal Management Regulations of the Lianxia Rescue Volunteer Team of Cunxin Benevolent Hall. This figure shows the internal management documents of the volunteer team, which cover member codes of conduct, participation requirements and operational boundaries. They serve as the fundamental regulatory basis for maintaining daily operations and organizational mobilization of the team. Photo taken by the author in Lianxia Town, Shantou, March 2026

These rules do not rely on formal administrative sanctions. Instead, they operate through behavioral thresholds and participation intensity to produce an ongoing process of selection. In this sense, organizational stability does not derive from the permanence of individual members, but from the continuous circulation of entry and exit. Boundaries are therefore not fixed once and for all; they are maintained through recurrent processes of filtering and renewal.

The third layer is endogenous authority and ritualized decision-making. Without coercive hierarchy, order relies on key figures such as team leaders and board members. Interviews show that personal reputation and resources form the core of cohesion. When disputes occur, leaders suspend specific conflicts and appeal to shared moral principles:

“We usually talk to them and ask them not to argue. Everyone is here to do good. There is no need to fight over small issues.” (Interviewee: board member, March 2026)

“Doing good” functions as both value and boundary language. It brings conflict back into a shared framework. This framework requires constant reinforcement by core members.

When interpersonal coordination fails, the association uses ritual. At key moments, such as the third day of the Lunar New Year, or when making major decisions, core members consult deities through traditional practices. This shifts contested decisions from human disagreement to shared authority. It reduces friction and enables coordination at low cost. Religious authority and organizational authority work together to stabilize order.

Thus, internal order relies on three mechanisms: meaning explains why members join, selection determines who stays, and authority resolves what happens when conflict emerges. This system allows members to accept personal cost transfer. The next question is how thousands of members coordinate action.

7.3 Decentralized Coordination and Trust-Based Collaboration

Moral mobilization explains why members stay, but coordination among thousands of individuals remains a separate challenge. The association adopts a distributed network structure. Under normal conditions, units operate locally. In crises, they rapidly reorganize into cross-domain networks. This structure works because of long-term trust among acquaintances.

In daily organization, the association shows strong decentralization. The headquarters does not manage all operations. Local contact points and rescue teams act based on local needs. Hospitals, schools, elderly care units, and rescue centers operate as parallel modules rather than strict hierarchy (Hou et al., 2024). Local units rely on residents and neighbors to form volunteer networks and handle local issues. This modular structure reduces administrative cost and allows simultaneous action across multiple locations.

Because the organization maintains decentralized autonomy in normal times, it can quickly shift to cross- domain coordination in crises. When local resources become insufficient, teams request support horizontally:

“If we lack manpower, we contact other teams, and they come immediately.” (Interviewee: rescue team leader, March 2026)

In large-scale disasters or events, the headquarters acts as an information hub. It uses digital tools such as messaging groups to send signals and mobilize across regions and levels. Dispersed units recombine into larger networks within a short time.

This rapid recombination depends on long-term relationships. Without formal contracts, cooperation relies on interpersonal ties built through repeated interaction. Field data show that members confirm boundaries through informal practices such as sharing cigarettes or tea. After joint action, organizers host meals or express thanks to maintain relationships. These everyday interactions sustain cooperation. Without them, emergency coordination would not function.

These relationships also prevent network breakdown during conflict. In some cases, disagreements between leaders lead to the formation of new teams:

“I was on another team, but I could not get along with the leader. He often shouted at volunteers. They are volunteers, not employees. We should reason with them. Later, the headquarters approved me to form a new team.” (Interviewee: team leader, March 2026)

Conflict does not lead to exit from the network. It leads to differentiation within it. New units emerge, but the underlying relationships remain shared. Organizational change does not destroy the cooperative base.

Finally, accumulated trust becomes a key advantage in crisis situations. Community workers note that residents respond more easily to association members:

“When people are in panic, they may think government staff are slow. But association members are local people. Residents see them as their own and trust them more.” (Interviewee: community worker, March 2026)

Helping rather than administering reflects an identity built over time. It does not appear suddenly in crisis. It results from long-term local embedding and relationship maintenance. The effectiveness of loose coupling lies in this accumulated trust, not only in structural design.

Therefore, cross-domain coordination depends on three conditions: local autonomy provides flexible units, interpersonal trust links these units, and continuous relationship maintenance stabilizes trust under pressure. This system requires continuous investment of time, money, and social effort. This cost forms the real foundation of rapid mobilization in crisis situations.

8 Everyday Practices and the Production of Grassroots Resilience

Building on the previous analysis of institutional complementarity in state–society interaction, and the internal mechanisms that sustain the organization in the absence of formal remuneration and contractual enforcement, this chapter addresses the third research question: what structural relationship exists between the benevolent hall's everyday practices and its crisis response capacity—and how daily accumulation is transformed into mobilizable governance ability when crises emerge. The analysis begins with routine assistance and stabilizing services, then extends to broader socio-ecological dimensions such as resource circulation, public space, and ethics of life. On this basis, it further explains how these accumulations in everyday contexts become mobilizable capacities in times of crisis.

8.1 Everyday Care and the Stabilization of Local Society

From the perspective of adaptive governance, social resilience is not a capacity that passively emerges only when crises occur, but rather a result of gradual accumulation through everyday interactions, continuous learning, and micro-level practices (May, 2022). This study finds that during

non-crisis periods, the benevolent hall does not suspend its public role; instead, through a series of low-intensity, routine, and community-embedded service activities, it continuously absorbs latent risks in grassroots society before they escalate into major crises, thereby weaving a dense social sponge at the everyday level.

At the level of material assistance, the benevolent hall fills marginal gaps in the formal welfare system through frequent and flexible everyday aid. Although the state-led social assistance system provides a basic safety net, both field observations and existing studies indicate that certain groups remain excluded due to limited access to information, procedural complexity, or failure to meet formal eligibility criteria (Hua, 2009). In response, volunteer teams of the benevolent hall provide supplementary support through regular donations, distribution of essential goods, and holiday visits. As one respondent noted, members “contribute a small amount each month, pool the funds to buy oil and rice, and support nearby low-income households without interruption.” (interview, March 2026)

In addition, the organization operates elderly canteens, meal delivery services, low-cost charity shops, and medical equipment lending stations, offering continuous support to elderly individuals, people with limited mobility, and households facing temporary hardship (Shantou Municipal People's Government, 2025). Seemingly mundane practices such as free herbal tea distribution in summer, educational grants, and support for community elderly associations also form part of this everyday safety net. These actions may not directly respond to crises, but they mitigate vulnerabilities at earlier stages of everyday life.

At the level of service provision, the benevolent hall extends routine assistance into more stable welfare infrastructures, forming long-term support for highly vulnerable populations. Compared to flexible everyday aid, these services emphasize sustained care and long-term engagement. For example, in the field of child and youth assistance, the organization has participated in establishing special education schools and further developed work therapy stations and employment support programs for people with disabilities. In elderly care and end-of-life support, it has invested in nursing homes, disability care institutions, and hospice facilities, providing long-term care and palliative services for individuals lacking family support (Rong, 2013). These institutions extend the organization's role beyond temporary relief, embedding it into multiple vulnerable stages of individual life cycles and gradually forming a more systematic structure of everyday support.

Beyond material provision and institutional services, the organization's everyday role is also reflected in the continuous repair of social relations and accumulation of trust networks. Whether assisting in maintaining order during festivals, cleaning community environments, or providing help in routine local matters, these activities are characterized by low intensity but high frequency. Particularly in tasks that appear marginal yet carry strong local moral significance—such as handling unclaimed bodies or providing funeral services for the elderly without family—its involvement does not pursue visible political returns but instead reinforces visibility and credibility through repetition. It is precisely through such sustained, embedded, and micro-level interventions that the benevolent hall is perceived not merely as a relief organization, but as a stable and reliable presence in community life.

In this sense, the organization's role in non-crisis periods is not merely a fragmented supplement to the state welfare system. Rather, through continuous micro-level interventions, it absorbs risks before they escalate, incorporates otherwise overlooked vulnerable groups into ongoing care, and accumulates social capital and organizational credibility. This accumulation is gradual and often invisible, yet it constitutes the real foundation of its long-term presence in local society.

8.2 Moral Ecology, Resource Circulation, and Social–Ecological Practice

Beyond human-centered care, the practices of the benevolent hall extend into resource flows, public space, and ethics of life, thereby participating in the maintenance of a broader socio-ecological system.

At the level of resource circulation, the organization has established used clothing collection points across the city, where donated items are sorted and processed. Usable clothing is cleaned, disinfected, and redistributed to welfare institutions, nursing homes, or impoverished rural areas, while unusable materials are repurposed into reusable textile resources (Shantou City Daily, 2012). Compared to one-time donations, this process of collection, sorting, and redistribution resembles a continuous system of resource circulation. It simultaneously addresses social assistance needs and reduces environmental pressure associated with textile waste. What is noteworthy here is not only the environmental outcome, but also the integration of charitable logic with resource circulation within a single everyday mechanism.

At the level of public space, the organization collaborates with communities and schools during events such as Arbor Day, mobilizing volunteers to participate in greening activities and occasionally conducting planting work in scenic areas and public spaces (Mai, 2018). Compared to other practices, the direct ecological impact of such activities is limited. However, their significance lies in organizational visibility: through highly public and participatory activities, the benevolent hall maintains its presence in everyday public life beyond moments of crisis or relief.

At the level of life ethics, the organization often conducts animal release rituals following rescue or charitable activities, returning fish, frogs, turtles, and other animals to natural water bodies. This practice has deep roots in local charitable traditions, where it is regarded as an extension of moral action—while medical aid and disaster relief are considered “worldly good deeds,” animal release is understood as a ritual of moral cultivation and karmic balancing (Cunxin Benevolent Hall, 2018). Notably, the organization marks released animals, particularly turtles, with red ink inscriptions indicating their released status to discourage recapture. This detail suggests that the act is not merely symbolic release but includes an intention to safeguard continued life. Research indicates that in certain localized religious practices, when notions such as the equality of all living beings are linked to concrete behavioral norms, non-human life may be systematically incorporated into moral concern and, under certain conditions, align with biodiversity conservation outcomes (Wang et al., 2022). However, this life-centered ethical practice does not necessarily align with modern environmental governance. Without proper species identification and habitat assessment, animal release may introduce ecological risks, including invasive species spread and ecosystem imbalance (Du et al., 2024). Thus, the organization’s practice reflects a localized ethics of life rather than a scientifically validated conservation framework.

Although these cases differ in nature, they collectively demonstrate that the organization’s everyday practices extend beyond human care to encompass resource circulation, public engagement, and ethical relations with life. The effects of these interventions are not always measurable and may involve internal tensions, yet they constitute the organization’s continuous presence in local society—a presence that forms the basis for resilience accumulation discussed in the next section.

8.3 From Everyday Presence to Crisis Mobilization

While the previous sections describe everyday assistance, resource circulation, and public engagement, a key question remains: how these dispersed practices are transformed into actionable capacity during crises.

My study finds that the organization's crisis mobilization capacity is not generated spontaneously during emergencies but is built upon trust relationships accumulated through continuous presence in non-crisis periods. Everyday practices such as distributing food, supporting education, planting trees, and providing assistance do not merely deliver services; they also continuously produce a relational infrastructure that can be activated when needed.

Field evidence illustrates this process. During flood rescue operations, affected residents are more willing to follow relocation arrangements made by volunteers; in urgent searches for missing persons, members can access surveillance footage from local shops based on organizational recognition; in large-scale public events, individuals wearing the organization's insignia receive greater cooperation on site. These forms of immediate coordination are not constructed during crises but derive from familiarity and trust built through repeated everyday interactions. Public willingness to cooperate stems from recognition of the organization and knowledge of its routine activities—an understanding formed gradually overtime.

In this sense, the organization establishes continuity between normal and exceptional conditions: everyday practices sediment trust structures, which are then rapidly activated in crisis contexts and translated into mobilization capacity. Rather than viewing crisis response as the emergence of new capabilities, it is more accurate to understand it as the reactivation of existing relational structures. It is precisely in this sense that grassroots social resilience is not produced in moments of crisis but is embedded and accumulated within everyday life.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

9.1 The Production of Social Resilience under State–Society Complementarity

The central question of this study is how grassroots social resilience is concretely produced. Based on the empirical analysis of the Cunxin Benevolent Hall, the answer advanced here is that resilience is not a pre-given state, but a capacity continuously generated through specific organizational structures and everyday practices. It depends on concrete actors and is accumulated and activated through repeated shifts between routine conditions and crisis situations. This argument contains three layers of meaning.

First, state–society complementarity is not a pre-defined institutional division of labor, but is enacted through ongoing interaction between regulation and response. In this process, grassroots governments rely on the mobilization capacity of the benevolent hall, while simultaneously regulating its operational boundaries through rule-setting and organizational embedding. The benevolent hall, in turn, secures room for action through strategic compliance and, in certain situations, refuses boundary-crossing directives by leveraging control over its own resources. The government substitutes fiscal expenditure with symbolic endorsement, while the benevolent hall converts this endorsement into reputational capital within local society. The persistence of this asymmetric exchange does not stem from institutional consensus, but from mutual dependence combined with boundary maintenance on both sides. While the typology proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) provides a useful analytical tool, a more important finding is that the relationship between formal and informal institutions is continuously adjusted across contexts. Within this dynamic interaction, social resilience is not a direct product of institutional design, but an outcome continuously generated through state– society engagement.

Both the interview materials and the organisation’s development trajectory indicate that the basic orientation of the Hall leadership is not simply to maintain the status quo. Instead, the organisation seeks to continuously expand its service capacity and institutional recognition without directly challenging the existing political order. From applying for permission to establish charitable clinics, to building welfare institutions, and more recently cooperating with the government to operate elderly canteens, the organisation has consistently expanded its operational boundaries through gradual adjustment. This logic of expansion is itself one of the conditions through which grassroots social resilience continues to be produced. As organisational capacity grows, more groups are brought into systems of everyday care, and potential risks can be absorbed at an earlier stage.

Second, the internal operational mechanisms of informal networks constitute the foundation for the sustained production of grassroots resilience. The capacity of the benevolent hall to respond rapidly in crises depends less on the degree of its cooperation with the government than on the internal system it has developed, in which resource mobilization, moral motivation, and loosely coordinated structures coexist. Small-scale membership contributions and supplementary funding from core members provide the material basis for action; belief- based discourse and ritualized decision-making integrate member behavior; and a localized, loosely coupled structure transforms into cross-regional coordination capacity during crises. The significance of these mechanisms lies not only

in sustaining organizational operation, but also in absorbing risks that might otherwise spill over, thereby continuously generating the capacity to cope with disturbances within grassroots society.

Third, mobilization capacity in crises is built upon the long-term accumulation of everyday care practices. Routine actions such as distributing food and oil, operating elderly canteens, recycling used clothing, and providing burial services for the unclaimed deceased gradually build trust and reputation through repetition, establishing a stable presence within local society. This presence enables the benevolent hall to quickly obtain public cooperation and community support during sudden events such as typhoons and pandemics. Social resilience, therefore, is not activated in moments of crisis, but is continuously produced and stored in everyday life (May, 2022).

These three findings together point toward a further revision of existing theories. The theory of institutional complementarity is usually used to explain functional coordination between macro-level institutional systems (Amable, 2016). However, the empirical evidence in this study suggests that this framework is also applicable to micro-level settings of grassroots governance. In this context, institutional complementarity is not a fixed structural arrangement. Rather, it is a dynamic process continuously reconstructed through regulation, accommodation, and boundary negotiation. The categories of substitutive and complementary institutions proposed by Helmke and Levitsky (2004) provide an important framework for understanding the relationship between formal and informal institutions. Yet the case of the Hall shows that a single organization may simultaneously display multiple relational forms under different governance situations. The boundaries between these categories are therefore far more fluid than theoretical models often assume.

At the same time, existing studies on social resilience are largely based on Western societies and tend to emphasize the importance of neighborhood networks, civic participation, and formal social organizations (Yang et al., 2021). The empirical materials in this study further suggest that, within the context of grassroots China, the production of social resilience often depends on historically continuous informal social networks (Yang et al., 2021a). Compared with previous studies that mainly stress the importance of state–society cooperation, the Hall case further demonstrates how this relationship is continuously maintained through everyday care practices, resource mobilization, and boundary negotiation, and how it is ultimately transformed into rapid response capacity during crises. In other words, social resilience does not simply emerge from the accumulation of community resources or organizational capacity. Rather, it gradually takes shape through long-term interactions among the state, local organizations, and residents (He et al., 2023). In grassroots

governance in China, the production of resilience neither relies entirely on formal institutions nor rests upon fully autonomous communities. Instead, it more often emerges from an ongoing relational process in which the state and informal social networks continuously negotiate, depend on one another, and at the same time maintain boundaries.

Furthermore, my finding suggests that, when incorporating non-Western experiences, community resilience theory needs to pay greater attention to how different state–society relationship structures shape the formation of resilience. It also calls for renewed attention to the foundational role of everyday care practices, informal organizational networks, and local social relations in the production of resilience.

9.2 Limitations and Reflections: The Costs and Boundaries of Resilience

However, what the benevolent hall demonstrates is not a cost-free form of stability, but a mode of resilience production predicated on continuous individual sacrifice. A fundamental tension is evident: while the organization sustains the stability of grassroots society, this stability is achieved through the ongoing expenditure of members' time, income, and physical health. In other words, system-level resilience is maintained by transferring and embedding risks at the individual level. This observation suggests that, in evaluating the governance significance of informal networks, attention should not be limited to their mobilization effectiveness in crises, but should also extend to examining who bears the costs of resilience and how these costs are sustained.

This observation also resonates with broader discussions in the literature on the economics of care, which have long shown that the stability of social systems often depends on forms of unpaid or under-recognized labor whose costs are absorbed at the individual level rather than by institutions (Jones et al., 2025; Bähre & Coe, 2026).

In terms of human resources, the organization is primarily composed of middle-aged and elderly local residents, with limited participation from younger generations and no stable mechanism for intergenerational continuity. Core members not only undertake coordination responsibilities, but also continuously provide financial support and reputational guarantees. The withdrawal of these key individuals may lead to a rapid decline in coordination capacity. In terms of financial resources, while membership fees, small-scale contributions, and supplementary funding from core

members can sustain daily operations, there is a clear risk of disruption in the face of cross-regional rescue demands or broader economic fluctuations. In terms of coordination structure, while a loosely organized form facilitates flexibility under routine conditions, it may result in fragmented entry points, unclear responsibilities, and overlapping resource allocation in complex crisis situations.

This also raises the question of case generalizability. The operational mechanisms developed by the Cunxin Benevolent Hall depend to a large extent on several relatively specific conditions: the accumulation of local reputation over more than a century, the cultural basis for mobilization provided by the strong folk religious traditions of the Chaoshan region, and the interpersonal networks supported by an acquaintance-based social structure. These conditions do not exist equally across all regions. In urban communities with high population mobility, in areas where religious traditions are weaker, or within newly established social organizations lacking long-term historical accumulation, the replicability of such mechanisms is likely to be limited. Therefore, the findings of this study are better understood as a conditional empirical argument rather than a universally applicable governance model. Under conditions of strong local embeddedness, historical continuity, and belief-based mobilization, informal social networks are able to continuously produce grassroots social resilience through endogenous mechanisms. This does not mean, however, that such arrangements can simply be replicated elsewhere as standardized solutions. It also suggests that an important question remains for future research: how similar functions might be cultivated in regions where these supporting conditions are absent.

9.3 Policy Implications: The Redistribution of Resilience

The difficulties faced by Hall members and managers are highly concrete rather than abstract: unstable funding sources, outdated equipment, and a clear imbalance between contribution and recognition. These structural constraints are precisely the issues that policy and formal state institutions should address.

At the financial level, although the central body of the Cunxin Benevolent Hall possesses legal fundraising qualifications, its subordinate rescue teams generally do not. Most teams therefore operate under conditions of financial self-reliance. Interviewed rescue team members commonly expressed exhaustion with existing fundraising methods. Many stated that they hoped resources could flow more steadily to grassroots teams, rather than relying on temporary contributions from members before each operation. This structural gap means that even if the central organization

maintains relatively stable finances, the grassroots units that actually carry out frontline tasks may continue to face long-term financial pressure. In response, policy measures could explore directly channeling task-based subsidies to rescue teams or establishing more stable internal resource transfer mechanisms within the organization itself. In this way, grassroots units could receive support after completing specific public service tasks rather than depending continuously on personal contributions from members.

At the level of equipment and technical capacity, grassroots rescue operations increasingly depend on drones, professional search-and-rescue equipment, and standardized first-aid skills. Yet within the Hall, operations still rely heavily on members' personal experience and long-term practical accumulation. Interviewees widely reported that professional equipment has not been updated for long periods, while operational knowledge of new rescue technologies shows clear generational gaps. This means that internal training alone is becoming insufficient for sustaining high-risk rescue activities. Governments or enterprises could therefore provide basic equipment support through donations, long-term lending arrangements, or joint procurement programs. At the same time, volunteer reserve systems could be developed in collaboration with universities and vocational schools to introduce professional expertise in areas such as first aid, drone operation, and legal affairs, thereby easing the organization's generational gaps in both manpower and technical knowledge.

At the level of coordination and institutional linkage, fieldwork materials indicate that although grassroots governments rely heavily on the Hall during crisis response, the boundaries of responsibility among different departments and rescue teams are often unclear during actual operations. Some government officials even admitted that, under emergency conditions, they themselves were not always certain which unit should serve as the coordinating body. This model, which depends heavily on temporary interpersonal coordination, provides flexibility but also creates information friction and blurred responsibility under high-pressure conditions. In response, more institutionalized communication mechanisms could be established to clarify coordinating actors and operational procedures under different scenarios. Some cooperative arrangements that currently depend mainly on personal relationships could also be transformed into minimal written protocols, thereby reducing coordination costs and responsibility-related risks during operations.

In addition, my findings also reveal an incentive problem that is often overlooked. Some interviewees noted that rescue operations sometimes expose volunteers not only to complaints from those

receiving assistance, but also to the feeling that they are functioning merely as “free labor for the police.” There is therefore a clear gap between contribution and recognition. This suggests that coordination between the state and informal organizations is not always built on equal terms. In the absence of stable protection and support, social actors may gradually develop the sense that they are being mobilized at low cost over long periods of time. Symbolic recognition and formal acknowledgment are therefore not simply matters of honor; they are also important conditions for sustaining long-term participation. Beyond existing commendation systems, more systematic recording and certification mechanisms could be established to transform rescue participation into accumulated forms of public service credentials. At the legal level, the scope of liability exemption for good-faith rescue actions could also be clarified further, reducing volunteers’ concerns about disputes arising from emergency assistance.

Overall, these measures do not imply the complete institutionalization of informal networks. Rather, they aim to make limited adjustments to those parts of the system most vulnerable to continuous overextension, while still recognizing the organization’s existing operational logic. The central issue is not how to transform the Hall into a standardized organization, but how to partially shift the costs of resilience production—currently concentrated at the individual level—back onto institutional structures, thereby reducing grassroots society’s long-term dependence on continuous self-sacrifice.

9.4. Research Reflections and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the fieldwork was conducted within a relatively concentrated period of time, which makes it difficult to capture the long-term evolution of the organisation. In addition, the analysis of state–society relations mainly focuses on the period after Cunxin Benevolent Hall obtained formal registration in 2009. Earlier historical developments, including the suspension of the organisation in 1951 and the restoration of its activities after China’s Reform and Opening-up, are not fully explored. The relationship between the Hall and grassroots governments, as well as the organisation’s internal resource structure and membership composition, may continue to change alongside broader institutional transformations. Longitudinal research and the introduction of a historical perspective would help explain the trajectory of these adjustments and show how state–society relations under different political contexts have shaped the organisation’s current operating logic.

Second, the interviewees in this study mainly consisted of Hall members and grassroots government staff, while the voices of aid recipients were less represented. Beneficiaries' perceptions and evaluations of the Hall, as well as their actual experiences within everyday care relationships, form another important dimension for understanding grassroots social resilience. Future studies could further enrich the understanding of the social functions of such informal networks by paying greater attention to the perspectives of recipient groups.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates, through the case of Cunxin Benevolent Hall, a form of resilience production that differs from explanations centred only on institutional design or network structure. The stability of grassroots society does not emerge from the elimination of risk, but from the continuous absorption and transformation of risk within the organisation itself. This process allows informal networks to maintain operational capacity across both ordinary and crisis periods. However, the cost of this resilience is the long-term accumulation of time pressure, financial burden, and physical exhaustion at the individual level. In this sense, the study raises a deeper question: when resilience depends on the continuous contribution and sacrifice of individuals, how should the limits and sustainability of this form of governance be reconsidered?

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Appendix

Appendix A. Interview consent form

Research Topic:

Traditional Social Organizations and Their Role in Grassroots Emergency Management Systems

Researcher:

Zihan Yu, Master's Student in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science, Lund University, Sweden

Email: 792131545@qq.com | Phone: +86 15815015822

1. Research Information

You are invited to participate in this academic interview study. The purpose of this research is to explore how traditional social organizations, such as benevolent halls, participate in and contribute to grassroots emergency management. Your experiences and insights will provide important empirical perspectives for understanding resilience in local social governance.

2. Participation Process

If you agree to participate, the interview will take approximately 20–30 minutes. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the research data.

3. Risks and Benefits

Participation in this study involves only minimal risk. This interview is an unpaid academic activity; however, your contribution will provide meaningful support to academic research in sustainability science and emergency management.

4. Privacy Protection and Data Security

Protecting your privacy is our highest priority. All interview recordings and transcripts will be strictly anonymized. Your name, specific position, and any information that could identify you personally will not appear in the final master's thesis or any public academic publication. Audio recordings will be securely stored in encrypted form and used solely for academic research purposes.

5. Voluntary Participation

Your participation is entirely voluntary. During the interview, you may refuse to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. You may also stop the interview or withdraw your consent at any time without any negative consequences.

6. Ethical Oversight and Complaints

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if you have concerns about this study, you may contact my academic supervisor, Professor Torsten Krause, at torsten.krause@LUCSUS.lu.se, or contact the relevant academic ethics review body at Lund University.

Informed Consent Statement

Please tick (✓) the appropriate option below:

☐ Yes ☐ No | I have fully understood the information above and voluntarily agree to participate in this academic interview.

☐ Yes ☐ No | I agree to the audio recording of this interview.

☐ Yes ☐ No | I agree that the anonymized interview materials may be used in the master's thesis research conducted by Zihan Yu at Lund University.

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B. Interview questions for Charity staff

Module 1: Initial Response and Resource Mobilization

At the beginning of the pandemic, through what channels did your organization realize that the situation had become serious?

From recognizing the severity of the situation to taking concrete action, what processes or steps did the organization go through?

At that time, large quantities of masks and emergency supplies were purchased. How were the necessary funds raised?

Were these resources based on long-term reserves, or were they mobilized temporarily in response to the crisis?

Under such emergency conditions, what motivated supporters to participate and contribute so quickly?

Regarding the distribution of supplies, were there internal discussions about different possible approaches?

How were final decisions ultimately made?

Module 2: Collaboration with Government

During implementation, how did the organization usually communicate with government departments or related authorities?

Was coordination mainly conducted in advance, or did communication take place simultaneously with ongoing action?

In your view, how does the government generally position benevolent halls: as collaborative partners, supplementary forces, or social support organizations?

Was this relationship gradually formed over a long period of cooperation?

In practice, when differences in understanding or working pace emerged, how were they usually coordinated?

Has a relatively stable pattern of cooperation developed over time?

Module 3: Internal Organization and Leadership

What role does the president or chairperson usually play in external coordination and internal decision-making?

For major decisions, does the organization rely more on collective discussion or centralized decision-making?

If leadership changes in the future, do you think the current operational system could continue smoothly?

Are there relatively fixed institutional arrangements or divisions of responsibility within the organization at present?

Module 4: Mobilization and Trust

When emergency tasks arise, how are volunteers usually mobilized?

From the moment information is released to the arrival of volunteers on-site, how long does the process usually take?

During operations, are there certain unwritten practices or tacit understandings that everyone follows?

How were these informal rules gradually formed?

During large-scale operations, have there been situations where outsiders misunderstood the organization or where disagreements emerged internally?

When such situations occurred, how did the organization usually communicate and make adjustments?

Concluding Questions

What do you think is the most important foundation that allows benevolent halls to continuously participate in local public affairs?

If you had to summarize it in one sentence, what is the biggest difference between benevolent halls and ordinary social organizations?

Follow-up Questions

What do you think this kind of mobilization mainly depends on? Religious belief in Patriarch Dafeng, or the mutual obligations embedded in local social relationships? When dangerous tasks need to be assigned, do volunteers usually require repeated persuasion, or do people immediately understand what needs to be done?

In large-scale operations, mistakes or uneven arrangements are probably unavoidable. Have there ever been situations where local residents questioned the organization, or where disagreements over resource distribution triggered a kind of 'trust crisis'? If that happened, what mechanisms did the organization rely on to rebuild trust?

When carrying out relief work, such as distributing supplies or disaster response, are there certain unwritten rules that experienced members naturally understand but newcomers may not? If someone ignores these norms, behaves irresponsibly, or avoids work, how is that usually handled informally within the organization? Would such a person still be included in future activities?

For example, if you or your neighbors suddenly encountered a life-threatening emergency, would people's first reaction be to contact the neighborhood committee or local government office, or to seek help directly from the benevolent hall? In your opinion, what is the biggest difference between seeking help from the government and seeking help from the benevolent hall? Is it about speed, flexibility, or something else?

Appendix C. Interview questions for government staff

At present, grassroots governance involves highly complex tasks and considerable administrative pressure. As a large local philanthropic organization, Cunxin Benevolent Hall possesses several distinctive advantages, including a large volunteer network, abundant social resources, and strong cross-regional mobilization capacity. These capacities enable the organization to effectively assist the government in delivering public services and implementing grassroots governance work. From the perspective of practical grassroots governance, how do you generally understand the role, core value, and supplementary function of Cunxin Benevolent Hall within local governance?

In emergency situations such as typhoons or public health crises, government financial approval procedures, material allocation systems, and emergency response mechanisms are all subject to strict institutional regulations. To some extent, this can create delays in response speed and make it difficult to cover every emergency relief scenario immediately. Based on your practical experience in grassroots governance:

In areas of emergency relief or public welfare provision that government personnel, authority, or procedures cannot fully cover, has a relatively stable tacit understanding emerged in which Cunxin Benevolent Hall informally assumes responsibility for certain “gap-filling” functions?

In specific areas such as advance payment for emergency supplies, handling unidentified bodies, assisting vulnerable populations, or post-disaster relief work, does the government mainly rely on Cunxin Benevolent Hall to provide bottom-line support? Could you describe specific local cases that illustrate how this government–society collaboration operates in practice?

It is understood that Cunxin Benevolent Hall oversees more than 300 volunteer teams. At present, many of these teams operate relatively independently, carrying out activities separately rather than under a unified coordination system. From the perspective of government emergency coordination and grassroots governance:

Compared with the current relatively autonomous model, would the government prefer to incorporate all volunteer teams into the formal emergency response system under unified command, dispatch, and management?

From the perspectives of governance pressure, emergency resilience, and risk management, do you believe that unified official incorporation would better support grassroots governance, or does

maintaining an autonomous and flexible external structure reduce governmental burdens and improve responsiveness? What are the major advantages and disadvantages of these two models?

Cunxin Benevolent Hall has long undertaken substantial public welfare and emergency support functions, thereby reducing pressure on local government. However, no fully unified mechanism appears to exist regarding funding sources or responsibility allocation. Based on practical governance experience:

Does the local government provide financial support for the organization's public service and emergency relief activities through mechanisms such as government procurement of services or special funding programs? Or does the organization mainly rely on social donations and self-financing to sustain its operations?

If volunteers encounter safety incidents, public opinion controversies, or operational disputes during charitable services, emergency rescue, or grassroots assistance work, are such responsibilities primarily absorbed by the government, or handled independently by Cunxin Benevolent Hall? Are there established conventions or informal arrangements regarding the allocation of responsibility?

Following major emergencies such as typhoons or disasters, governments at different levels usually conduct formal evaluations, issue commendations, and summarize emergency response work. Regarding the volunteer and relief activities carried out by Cunxin Benevolent Hall:

In official reports and internal government summaries, how is the contribution of the organization usually characterized? Are these achievements incorporated into the broader accomplishments of government coordination, or are they recognized and commended separately?

From the perspective of grassroots coordination, do Cunxin Benevolent Hall and its volunteer teams place significant importance on official recognition, honorary titles, or symbolic acknowledgment from the government?

At present, higher-level authorities are strengthening the standardization, normalization, and institutional regulation of social organizations. As a large-scale, historically rooted, and socially influential traditional philanthropic organization, Cunxin Benevolent Hall occupies a particularly distinctive regulatory position. From the perspective of long-term governance planning and internal government considerations:

Regarding future regulatory trends, does the government tend to favor tighter control measures, organizational restructuring, operational limitations, and stronger regulation, or does it prefer to

further empower the organization, deepen cooperation, and encourage broader participation in grassroots governance?

In internal policy discussions and risk assessments, what kinds of governance risks or operational concerns are considered most significant regarding the organization's development, volunteer management, and public service activities?

Appendix D. Interview Meeting Logbooks

NUMBER	DATE	TIME	NAME	IDENTITY
Interviewee 1	MARCH 3rd, 2026	16:30 (duration 20 min)	anonymous	President
Interviewee 2	MARCH3rd,2026	18:00 (duration 45 min)	anonymous	VicePresident
Interviewee 3	March5th, 2026	11:00 (duration 30 min)	anonymous	boardmember
Interviewee 4	March 7th, 2026	15:00 (duration 40 min)	anonymous	RescueTeamCaptain
Interviewee 5	March 9th, 2026	17:00 (duration 40 min)	anonymous	RescueTeamCaptan
interviewee 6	March 9th, 2026	17:00 (duration 40 min)	anonymous	RescueTeamDeputyCaptain
Interviewee 7	March 9th, 2026	17:00 (duration 40 min)	anonvmous	RescueTeamDeputyCaptain
Interviewee 8	March 13th, 2026	13:00 (duration 20 min)	anonymous	GovernmentStaf
Interviewee 9	March 13th, 2026	14:00 (duration 25 min)	anonymous	CommunityStaf