

The Residents' Committee in China's Political System: Democracy, Stability, Mobilization

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The residents' committee is the lowest level of the administrative hierarchy in China's cities, but it is also an important part of the political system. Under the rubric of community construction and grassroots democracy, residents' committees are undergoing certain democratic reforms such as improved procedures for elections and a more open and participatory governance process. At the same time, they are also important resources for the regime in terms of consolidating support and control, especially where maintenance of stability and mass mobilization are concerned. This paper analyzes the multifaceted nature of the residents' committee and its importance in China's political system.

KEYWORDS: grassroots democracy; community; stability maintenance; mobilization; residents' committee.

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The residents' committee (居民委員會, sometimes also translated as the neighborhood committee, abbreviated as RC hereafter) is the lowest level of the administrative hierarchy in urban

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China. It is the urban counterpart of the rural village committee. An area under the administration of an RC is usually termed a "community" (*shequ*, 社區). The term "community" generally conveys characteristics such as close social bonds, face-to-face interactions, a natural and common identity, voluntary action, neighborliness, etc. The Chinese *shequ* is supposed to foster these values as well, but it is also entrusted with many social, political, administrative, and policing duties by the state. The organization which the state entrusts with all these community duties and authority is the RC.

Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese leadership has allowed the development of a certain degree of democracy in grassroots units, beginning with those in rural areas. Village polls attracted the attention of political scientists inside and outside China who pondered the wider meaning of these elections. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, grassroots elections were extended to urban areas, and officers of the RCs began to be democratically elected as well. Some other electoral and democratic reforms were also introduced in order to increase popular participation. In the late 1990s the Ministry of Civil Affairs (民政部, MCA hereafter) also launched the community construction (社區建設) policy, under which the RC has become the major institution for the governance and management of urban neighborhoods. It is also an important component of the political system, especially when it comes to the implementation of laws and policies.¹ Nevertheless, the RC remains one of the less studied institutions in Chinese politics.

¹Article 12 of the Law on Physical Culture and Sports states that RCs shall organize exercises and other physical activities for residents; Article 13 of the Compulsory Education Law states that RCs shall assist the government in bringing school-age children and adolescents to school; Article 12 of the Law on Population and Family Planning states that RCs shall conduct family planning work in accordance with the law; Articles 43 and 44 of the Marriage Law give RCs the power to intervene in family issues such as domestic violence and the maltreatment and desertion of family members; the 2007 Emergency Response Law effectively incorporates RCs into the emergency response and control mechanism. According to one count, as of 1998, there were around 130 laws and regulations that contained articles referring to the RC. See Yang Hongtai, Wu Zhihua, and Shen Haiping, eds., *Chengshi shequ tizhi gaige yu fazhi jianshe yanjiu* (System reform and legal institutional building of urban communities) (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2004), 35.

In addition to studies that introduce the RC system or the community construction policy to unfamiliar Western readers,² there are two other streams of English-language literature on this subject. One stream focuses on the institution's democratic aspects, including the participation of residents in RC elections,³ while the other relates the RC to the party-state's efforts to exert control over the urban populace.⁴ In this paper, I shall examine this duality in more comprehensive scope and depth. A brief historical overview of the RC will be followed by two sections dealing with the two seemingly contradictory roles of the RC: promoting grassroots democracy and serving as a tool for "stability maintenance" and mass mobilization. In the fourth section, I compare the RC with some similar organizations in other societies. The final section contains some theoretical reflections.

The Residents' Committee: A Historical Sketch

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, or simply the party) defeated its archrival, the Kuomintang, it inherited a broken China, exhausted by civil war, economic mismanagement, and social disintegration, particularly in urban areas.⁵ The Kuomintang had maintained a system of urban

²Benjamin L. Read, "Revitalizing the State's Urban 'Nerve Tips'," *China Quarterly* 163 (September 2000): 806-20; James Derleth and Daniel R. Koldyk, "The *Shequ* Experiment: Grassroots Political Reform in Urban China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 13, no. 41 (November 2004), 747-77.

³Yong Gui, Joseph Y. S. Cheng, and Weihong Ma, "Cultivation of Grassroots Democracy: A Study of Direct Elections of Residents Committees in Shanghai," *China Information* 20, no. 1 (March 2006): 7-31; Jie Chen, Chunlong Lu, and Yiyin Yang, "Popular Support for Grassroots Self-Government in Urban China: Findings from a Beijing Survey," *Modern China* 33, no. 4 (October 2007): 505-28.

⁴Linda Wong and Bernard Poon, "From Serving Neighbors to Recontrolling Urban Society: The Transformation of China's Community Policy," *China Information* 19, no. 3 (September 2005), 413-42; Miu Chung Yan and Jian Guo Gao, "Social Engineering of Community Building: Examination of Policy Process and Characteristics of Community Construction in China," *Community Development Journal* 42, no. 2 (October 2007): 222-36.

⁵Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the Peoples' Republic* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 86.

administration and control called the *baojia* (保甲). All families were integrated into a *baojia* network, and each unit within a *baojia* had a designated leader who liaised with the local authorities and public security officials.⁶ When the CCP took over the cities, the *baojia* was declared a tool of the reactionary and imperialist forces and disbanded. A significant number of *baojia* personnel were targets of persecution, though in reality, many of them were also temporarily retained by the CCP for lack of a better alternative, as it was still necessary to maintain local order in the chaotic period of regime transition in the cities.⁷ Most importantly, the CCP also understood very well that this kind of grassroots organization was an essential part of its efforts to control and (re-)integrate the urban populace in the midst of regime change, and vital for securing the foundation of its own regime. The RC was the communists' answer to the *baojia* system.

According to the most recent archival research, the first residents' committee was founded in Hangzhou. In December 1949, Hangzhou (杭州) city government promulgated an ordinance that stipulated that all *baojia* organizations in the city had to be replaced by a "new mode of democratic organization"—the residents' committee. This city ordinance eventually became the basis of a 1954 law that formally established and consolidated a variety of grassroots units into the residents' committee as the base-level authority in all China's cities.⁸

Before 1954, a variety of local organizations performed various tasks for the new regime, such as "poverty and disaster relief, administration of refugees and jobless wanderers, propagation of party policies, dispelling

⁶Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 369-70.

⁷Zhu Guoming, "Shanghai: cong fei baojia dao jumin weiyuanhui de dansheng" (Shanghai: from the dissolution of *baojiao* to the birth of the residents' committee), *Dang'an yu shixue* (Archives and History) (Shanghai) 2 (March-April 2002): 58; Li Yurong, *Zhonggong jieguan chengshi de lilun yu shijian* (Theory and practice of the CCP's takeover of cities) (Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), 30.

⁸Han Quanyong, "Jianguo chuqi chengshi jumin zuzhi de fazhan yu qishi (zhi yi): xin Zhongguo diyi ge dansheng shimo" (The development and inspiration of urban residents' organizations in the early history of the PRC [part 1]: the story of their first incarnation in the new China), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 10 (2006): 34-36.

residents' doubts [about the new regime], security work, census enumeration, and household registration."⁹ For instance, in Shanghai, grassroots organizations as diverse as "tenants' unions," "tap water management committees," "workers' welfare unions," and "winter defense teams" were widespread in many neighborhoods.¹⁰ All these organizations were led and supported by activists closely aligned with the CCP. Nevertheless, the overlapping functions and multi-headed leadership of these grassroots organizations resulted in disorganized and chaotic urban administration.¹¹

In 1953, Peng Zhen (彭真), the then mayor of Beijing, suggested in a report that

an organization such as the residents' committee needs to be established. Its nature is that of a mass self-governance organization, not a governmental organ. Its primary mission is to organize residents who are not working in factories, shops, schools, or government offices. Under the principle of self-governance, the RC should take care of people's welfare, publicize the policies and laws of the government, mobilize residents to support the government, and communicate to the base-level government the opinions of residents. Residents should elect officers of the RC. The work of the RC should be under the guidance of urban base-level government or its field office [street office], but organizationally the residents' committee is not a "leg" of the base-level government; it should not be given too many tasks.¹²

At Peng Zhen's urging, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC, China's legislative body) passed both the Organic Rules on Urban Residents' Committees and the Organic Rules on Street Offices in 1954. With these two laws in place, the RC and the street office (街道辦事處, SO, the immediate administrative superior of the RC) were fully established as the governing bodies of grassroots communities and

⁹Chen Hui and Xie Shicheng, "Jianguo chuqi chengshi jumin weiyuanhui yanjiu" (A study of the urban residents' committees in the early history of the PRC), *Dangdai Zhongguoshi yanjiu* (Contemporary China History Studies) (Beijing) 9, no. 4 (2002): 45.

¹⁰Han Quanyong, "Jianguo chuqi chengshi jumin zuzhi de fazhan yu qishi (zhi er): zhengti chuding, juweihui zhongjie baojiazhi lishi" (The development and inspiration of urban residents' organizations in the early history of the PRC [part 2]: early establishment of the regime, the ending of the baojia system by the residents' committees), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing) 11 (2006): 24.

¹¹Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, 369-73.

¹²Peng Zhen, *Peng Zhen xuanji* (Selected works of Peng Zhen) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991), 240.

neighborhoods in China's cities. They were also meant to complement the work units (單位) in a dual administrative system. Whereas workers and students were organized at their places of employment or study, the primary mission of the SOs and RCs was to organize residents outside the orbit of work units, such as housewives, hawkers, petty artisans, jobless youths, and elderly people, who in the CCP's socialist ideological framework in those years were classed as the "non-productive population."¹³ These people were at that time estimated to comprise around 60 percent of the urban population. It was expected that with industrialization, economic growth, and the completion of socialist transformation, the work unit system would eventually cover every single individual in the cities, and both the street office and residents' committee would eventually cease to exist. But for the time being, these organizations were needed to carry out the "total organization of the population."¹⁴

The RCs could not escape the revolutionary frenzy that erupted under Mao's rule. They were absorbed into the urban communes during the failed economic program of the Great Leap and reorganized as "revolutionary residents' committees" during the Cultural Revolution, mimicking the "revolutionary committees" that popped up at higher levels of the administration.

The end of the Cultural Revolution brought normality back to China's social life and political institutions. From the early 1980s, the MCA solicited opinions concerning revision of the Organic Rules on Urban Residents' Committees.¹⁵ In 1989, the NPC passed the new Organic Law on Urban Residents' Committees (hereafter the RC Law). The RC Law affirms the role and status of the residents' committee while expanding its responsibilities in the reform era. About ten years after the passage of this

¹³Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 22; Janet Weitzner Salaff, "Urban Residential Communities in the Wake of the Cultural Revolution," in *The City in Communist China*, ed. John Wilson Lewis (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1971), 289.

¹⁴Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, 377.

¹⁵"Cui Naifu jiu chengshi juweihui zuzhifa caoan zuo shuoming" (Cui Naifu explains the draft of the Urban Residents' Committee Law), *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily), August 30, 1989.

law, the policy of community construction was introduced. This policy assigns great importance to RCs in China's social and political development. The main reason for the revival of the RC is the decline of the work unit system.

The work unit system was one of the institutions that buttressed the totalistic political structure of the Maoist years. In the post-Mao era, its functions have been dramatically transformed. Before the 1990s, the work unit system¹⁶ was the main mechanism for providing employment; collecting taxes; allocating welfare resources; monitoring and controlling the movement of employees; certifying births, deaths, and marriages; and implementing government policies. The basic foundations of the system were laid in 1956 with the completion of the "socialist transformation" of urban private enterprises. At the system's height, most residents in urban China were organized into work units, and they became the single most effective channel through which the state connected with and controlled each individual. Beginning in the 1990s, the Chinese government undertook the task of reforming state enterprises to make them more economically efficient, self-sufficient, and market-oriented. These reforms required work units to relinquish both their welfare functions (housing, medical care, education, childcare, etc.) and their political functions (political surveillance, ideological education, mobilization, etc). By doing this, the reforms released the urban population from the tight control of the state, but at the same time cut off the existing channels for allocating welfare resources. Many of these relinquished functions were now to be taken up by the RC.¹⁷ The reform era also witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of urban residents traditionally outside the work unit system, such as migrant laborers, laid-off workers, and employees of non-state enterprises.

¹⁶There were work units in state and collective enterprises, bureaucratic organs, and agencies at different levels of government, as well as in the state's "service units" (事業單位) such as hospitals, universities and schools, and research centers.

¹⁷Kazuko Kojima and Ryosei Kokubun, "The 'Shequ' Construction Programme and the Chinese Communist Party," in *Bringing the Party Back In: How China Is Governed*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard and Zheng Yongnian (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 217-38.

The immediate implications of the decline of the work unit system for urban governance should not be underestimated. For example, the monitoring of criminal or politically subversive activities, as well as the provision of welfare services, became harder. Administrative and governmental programs such as family planning, public health, reemployment schemes, and the census still needed reliable grassroots agencies to implement them. Large inflows of migrant labor had the potential to cause serious problems if left unmanaged. Issues of a local and essentially community nature, such as neighborhood disputes, pollution, or the use and management of community public goods, all required a body with the authority to carry out mediation and deliberation so as to prevent these problems from escalating into wider conflicts that would overload the city governments. It was clear to both central and local officials that a new urban governance system in which government programs would be implemented and services delivered "on the basis of residence rather than work unit"¹⁸ was needed.

It was in this context that the RC was revitalized to counter the social ills and governance crisis resulting from the decline of work units.¹⁹ This was a two-stage process: in the first stage, the community service (社區服務) policy of the 1980s and early 1990s focused more on welfare and service provision, and the second stage began with the introduction of the community construction (社區建設) policy in the late 1990s. Under the community service policy, the RC became a provider and coordinator of various welfare services (such as management of state insurance programs and welfare services for vulnerable groups). At the same time, it was allowed to engage in certain community economic activities, such as running grocery stores and barber shops. The community service policy, however, was not exactly successful, as many RCs were more interested in the commercial aspects of the policy than they were in welfare provision.²⁰

¹⁸Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution to Reform*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 186.

¹⁹Read, "Revitalizing the State's Urban 'Nerve Tips'."

²⁰Qingwen Xu and John F. Jones, "Community Welfare Services in Urban China: A Public-Private Experiment," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 52.

It was clear that issues emerging from the rapidly transforming and diversifying urban population necessitated a larger, and more fundamental, change in the methods and institutions of urban governance. The central leadership was convinced that urban base-level governance had to be rigorously strengthened under a more comprehensive, long-term, and strategic paradigm—the community construction policy. In 1992 the first nationwide conference on community construction was held in Hangzhou, Zhejiang (浙江) province. In 1999, the MCA issued a policy document, "On the Setting up of Experimental Sites of Community Construction Nationwide," which selected several districts in twenty-one cities as experimental sites for community construction.²¹ As experimental sites, these district and city governments were given greater autonomy to initiate reforms "without explicit authorization from the central government."²² In 2000, the MCA issued the "Opinion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Promoting Community Construction Nationwide," which is the most authoritative policy document on the implementation of the community construction policy. The document identifies five principles of community construction: that it should be people-based (以人為本), involve the sharing of resources between different community organizations, undertake the reform of community governance institutions, include the expansion of community democracy and self-governance, and be flexible and pragmatic in designing local community construction projects. Under the policy, the size of the RC was to be expanded by consolidating several RCs into a larger "community residents' committee" (社區居民委員會), which would serve to integrate and economize on the use of community resources.²³ This

²¹These cities were: Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Qingdao, Shijiazhuang, Haikou, Shenyang, Tianjin, Hefei, Harbin, Benxi, Xi'an, Wuhan, Jinan, Foshan, Shenzhen, Kelamayi, Luohe, Xiamen, and Changchun.

²²Derleth and Koldyk, "The *Shequ* Experiment: Grassroots Political Reform in Urban China," 751. The authors of this article erred in stating that the selected sites were communities. In fact, these sites are districts. It is the district government that initiates community construction projects.

²³Tony Saich, "The Changing Role of Urban Government," in *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies*, ed. Shahid Yusuf and Tony Saich (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008), 200.

"community RC" is modeled after policy experiments conducted in Shenyang (瀋陽). The larger RC now embraces around one to three thousand households, while the original RC generally had about eight hundred to one thousand households.

Community service is retained as a component of the community construction policy, but the policy goes beyond welfare provision to include environmental issues (neighborhood cleanliness, the expansion and maintenance of "green" areas, etc.), health administration (disease prevention measures, health and sanitary inspections, family planning, etc.), public security (legal education and community correction, management of migrant population, ensuring social stability, etc.), cultural development ("spiritual civilization" building, ideological-political work, science education, etc.), grassroots democracy (elections, etc.), party-building (organizing community party cells), and any other things that are deemed to be relevant. Some of these jobs are clearly outside of the RC's legal mandate, such as tasks that are clearly the responsibility of grassroots party organizations.²⁴

The community construction policy has thus greatly boosted the importance of the RC, giving it numerous administrative responsibilities and functions. It is ironic that the RC was originally designed as a temporary institution that would wither away once "work unit socialism" was fully developed in China. Instead, the work units have lost their once ubiquitous presence in the urban landscape, while the RCs have found new missions in the reform era.²⁵ Perhaps unexpectedly, one of these missions is to be bases of democratic politics in urban China.

²⁴For example, in October 2003, the United Front Department of the CCP's Central Committee (中央統戰部) issued the document "Opinions on Strengthening Community United Front Work (Trial Version)." Following this document, the Shanghai city government required that all the RCs in the city engage in united front work, and ruled that such work would be included in the performance appraisals of RC officers. See Lin Shangli, ed., *Tongyi zhanxian yu guojia jianshe* (United front and nation building) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2008), 98.

²⁵Wang Bangzuo et al., *Juweihui yu shequ zhili: chengshi shequ jumin weiyuanhui zuzhi yanjiu* (The residents' committee and community governance: an organizational study of urban community residents' committees) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2003), 271, 306.

The Residents' Committee and Grassroots Democracy in Urban China

The Chinese political leadership has, at least in its rhetoric, embraced grassroots democracy and mass self-governance.²⁶ The MCA document on community construction released in 2000 recognizes that community construction should promote grassroots urban democracy. In 2005, China's State Council issued a white paper entitled "Building of Political Democracy in China" which spells out the strategy of political reform and democratization preferred by the Chinese leadership. Chapter 6 of the white paper is devoted to grassroots democracy, a component of which is community democracy and self-governance. This document also describes the four basic elements of grassroots democracy: democratic elections, democratic decision making, democratic management, and democratic supervision. While the first element stresses the democratic selection of leaders, the other three elements stress the importance of democratic public administration. Observers could, of course, dismiss such pronouncements as mere propaganda, but this would not help us understand the preferred strategies and policies of the party's leadership. Official discourses do at least serve as benchmarks of acceptable political reform. Therefore, I shall examine the democratic reform of the RC system within this official framework.²⁷

Elections

In comparison to its rural counterpart (the 1998 Organic Law on Village Committees), the RC Law is notably deficient when it comes to specifying the rules and procedures governing the election of RC officers. The lack of legal clarification means that local authorities themselves are able

²⁶In his report to the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, in a passage dealing with political development and restructuring, the then CCP general secretary, Jiang Zemin, maintained that "extending democracy at the grassroots level is the groundwork for developing socialist democracy," which includes "[improving] self-governance among urban residents and [building] new-type and well-managed communities featuring civility and harmony." See Appendix 1 in Lieberthal, *Governing China*, 370.

²⁷Winberg Chai, "China's 2005 White Paper: 'Building of Political Democracy in China'," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 18-19.

to devise electoral processes for the RCs under their jurisdiction, sometimes introducing genuine innovations and reforms that improve the procedural fairness and democratic nature of elections, but sometimes leaving loopholes or introducing ambiguity that allows them to manipulate the electoral process.

The RC Law permits three modes of election: (1) direct election by all eligible residents; (2) indirect election by household representatives; and (3) indirect election by residents' representatives. The third mode is by far the most widespread in most Chinese cities, but it is also considered to be deeply flawed. According to the RC Law, "residents' representatives" are also supposed to be elected, but in reality they are generally appointed by local officials.²⁸ The role of residents in the selection of these representatives is usually limited to informal consultation and confirmation.²⁹ The major direction of electoral reform is therefore to phase out this mode of election and replace it, preferably, by the most democratic mode—direct election by all eligible residents. The MCA acknowledges that directly elected RCs have been the subject of far fewer complaints and petitions by voters than those that were indirectly elected by residents' representatives.³⁰ In 2008, the MCA officially set a target that 50 percent of all RCs should be directly elected by 2010.³¹

Other areas earmarked for reform include the nomination process. Traditionally, only organizations (the party, the street office, the RC itself, the election committee, "democratic parties," or other "mass organiza-

²⁸Zhan Chengfu, ed., *Shequ juweihui xuanju gongzuo jincheng baogao* (A report on the progress of community residents' committee election work) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2006), 24.

²⁹Thomas Heberer, "Institutional Change and Legitimacy via Urban Elections? People's Awareness of Elections and Participation in Urban Neighborhoods (*Shequ*)," in *Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China: Institutional Change and Stability*, ed. Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert (New York: Routledge, 2009), 86.

³⁰Zhan Chengfu, *Shequ juweihui xuanju gongzuo jincheng baogao*, 24.

³¹Li Huizi, Yue Ruefang, and Lai Zhen, "Minzhengbu: chengshi shequ zhixuan fugaimian 2010 nianqian jiangda 50%" (Ministry of Civil Affairs: direct elections for urban community residents' committees to expand to 50% before 2010), *Zhongguo gaigebao* (China Reform Daily) (Beijing), August 5, 2008. I do not yet have data on the most recent round of RC elections.

tions") were permitted to nominate candidates. Residents' opinions were sometimes solicited and considered, but otherwise they tended to play only an insignificant role in the preliminary nomination process. New electoral reforms allow for self-nomination and joint nomination by a number of eligible residents. This does not mean that organizational nomination is no longer practiced, however. Most elections permit both self-nomination and organizational nomination, with the candidates on the organizational ticket generally considered to be official candidates.

Another area of reform is the opening up of campaign activities. In the city of Ningbo, the local election regulations stipulate that "candidates can meet voters in their own way." Some candidates took this stipulation as an opportunity to introduce some innovative practices, such as door-to-door canvassing for votes, a rarity in Chinese elections. More interesting was the emergence of election campaign teams (選舉後援團/選舉智囊團), organized by the candidates. These teams recommended campaign strategies, gave their candidates image makeovers, and served as election observers during the ballot.³² Guangxi province also pioneered the introduction of secret voting booths and anonymous ballots in its RC elections.³³ In addition, competitive elections (差額選舉) took the place of elections in which there were the same number of candidates as seats (等額選舉) (see tables 1 and 2).

As the data in the two tables show, the use of direct elections and more open nomination systems has increased in a number of provinces, while elections by residents' representatives and controlled nomination has decreased. Of course, such data do not tell us much more than that. As I will discuss later, official manipulation is still very likely to occur in direct elections with open nomination, but by using direct elections and open nomination as benchmarks, we can make the assumption that urban grass-

³²Li Fan, "Shequ juweihui xuanju shouci dachu chuangxinpai" (Innovative ideas in residents' committee elections), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 12 (2003): 20.

³³Li Fan, "Yige cong nongcun xuanju xiang chengshi xuanju guodu de chenggong shili" (A successful case of transition from rural elections to urban elections), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 11 (2002): 25.

Table 1
Modes of RC Elections in Selected Provinces and Cities (2001-2003)

Modes of Election Province/Years	Direct Election (%)		Election by Household Representatives (%)		Elections by Residents' Representatives (%)	
	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06
Beijing	0.58	0.69	7.54	5.4	91.88	93.91
Tianjin	2		50	48.05	48	51.85
Hebei		3.85		25.85		70.3
Shanxi		5		20		60
Liaoning		8.05		14.66		77.29
Jilin		0.2		99.8		
Heilongjiang		50		35		15
Shanghai	31.38	53			68.62	47
Jiangsu		8.6		37.8		50.2
Zhejiang		20.87		8.4		70.53
Anhui		30.23		15.91		53.86
Fujian		5.88		11.36		82.76
Jiangxi		5		10		84.5
Henan	17		19		64	
Hubei	11.6		20		68.84	
Hunan	30	52.99	20	14.63	50	32.38
Guangdong		22.1		14.1		55.51
Guangxi	42.6	69.3			57.4	30.7
Hainan		15				70
Chongqing				30	88.73	70
Sichuan		16.1		25.3		57.5
Guizhou		20		40		35
Yunnan		10		21		68.2
Tibet		100				
Shaanxi				12		88
Gansu		11		10		77
Qinghai		7.8				92.2
Ningxia	2.21	14.39			97.79	85.61
Total	15.21	23.05	12.95	19.20	73.53	58.43

Sources: Zhan Chengfu, ed. *Shequ juweihui xuanju gongzuo jinzhan baogao* (A report on the progress of election work of the residents' committee) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2006), 13-14; Shi Weimin et al., *Zhongguo shequ jumin weiyuanhui xuanju yanjiu* (A study of community residents' committee elections of China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2009), 241-43.

Notes: Some of the figures in selected provinces do not add up to 100 percent because they used some other method of election. Some provinces from the original table are not selected here because of incomplete data.

Table 2
Nomination Methods in Selected Provinces and Cities (2001-2003, 2004-2006)

Provinces/Years	Street Office (%)		Residents' Small Groups/Residents' Representatives (%)		Joint Nomination by Voters (%)		Self-Nomination (%)		Others (%)	
	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06	01-03	04-06
Beijing			100	99.44		0.56				
Tianjin	70		20		5		5			
Liaoning				15.5		82		1.5		1
Jilin						34		30		36
Heilongjiang				55		35		20		
Shanghai			95.1		4.1		0.8			
Fujian			100	79.14		13.54				7.32
Jiangxi		40		34						
Henan	69		13		7.8		3.7		6.5	
Hunan			65		20		5		10	
Guangdong		3.65		40.69		9.76		4.07		41.83
Guangxi				30.7		69.3				
Hainan				10		80		10		
Chongqing				50		20		30		
Sichuan		0.4		53.4		28.5		3.7		14
Guizhou				40		50		10		
Yunnan		32		25		38		4		1
Tibet						100				
Shaanxi		76		23		1				
Qinghai				85		12				
Ningxia				27.89	38	3.28		3	62	68.83

Source: Zhan, ed., *Shequ jaweihui xuanju*, 11-12; Shi et al., *Zhongguo shequ jumin weiyuanhui*, 264-65.

roots democracy is on the correct, albeit slow and uneven, path.

Democratic Public Administration

As mentioned above, the official version of "grassroots democracy" contains four elements. The 2005 white paper on democracy provides us with the official definition of the latter three elements in the context of community democracy:

In terms of democratic decision-making, the residents of a community, as the mainstay in this respect, exercise their decision-making power by holding residents' [assembly], forums, hearings and through other effective forms and channels. In the aspect of democratic management, the [residents' committees] work within the framework of law, standardize their work according to the community residents' self-government rules and regulations, in an effort to make the residents more conscious of being the masters of their own affairs and concerned about public affairs in the community. In the aspect of democratic supervision, the [residents' committee] practices open management; all issues of public concern, difficult problems and important matters involving the residents' interests are made public to the residents in a timely manner and subject to their discussions, comments, suggestions and supervision.³⁴

In this way, the white paper has already defined the scope and content of democratic public administration. In comparison to elections, these aspects of democratic reform in grassroots communities have in general received less scholarly attention. Thus, in the following subsections I will discuss them in some detail. However, due to a lack of systematic data, the material I present will be indicative rather than representative. Nevertheless, it does serve the useful purpose of illustrating how different local governments have devised different ways of implementing the vague democratic goals contained in national pronouncements.

Democratic Decision Making

It seems that the residents' assembly (居民大會) or the assembly of residents' representatives (居民代表大會, hereafter the RA)³⁵ is supposed

³⁴"China's 2005 White Paper," 18-19.

³⁵The residents' assembly, attended by all adult residents of a community, is generally the rule in smaller communities, while larger communities tend to hold assemblies of residents'

to be the main decision maker (legislature) while the RC is the implementer of decisions (executive). According to a handbook on RC work published by the MCA, "the highest form of residents' self-governance is the RA. . . It is through the RA that ordinary residents exercise their right to govern themselves."³⁶ It seems that the RA provides an avenue for direct participation by community residents, and could have some superficial similarities with the "real democracy" of New England-style town meetings in some U.S. states. The RA and the RC are thus the participatory and electoral institutions of community democracy.

However, in a confusing explanation of the relationship between the RA and the RC, the same handbook also states that the working principle of the RC is "legislative-executive unity" (議行合一).³⁷ According to this principle, the RC is the "highest decision-making organ." The view that the RA is the "highest power organ" while the RC is the executive organ of the RA is without theoretical basis, the authors of this handbook claim.³⁸ This theoretical obscurity and the vague division of authority between the RA and the RC serve to render the RA ineffective in reality. Most RCs only pay lip service to the RAs' purported "decision-making power." Officers of RCs and residents tend to disregard this institution in practice.³⁹

To make "democratic decision-making" more genuine, a reform known as "separation of legislation and execution" (議行分設) has been

representatives. In line with the recent trend toward consolidation, most communities today only hold assemblies of residents' representatives.

³⁶Wang Zhenyao and Bai Yihua, eds., *Jiedao gongzuo yu jumin weiyuanhui jianshe* (The work of the street office and the construction of the residents' committee) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1996), 235.

³⁷The idea of "legislative-executive unity" comes from Marx's description of the Paris Commune: "The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time." See Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), 57. According to this principle, legislative and executive powers are united in one organ, in contrast to the "separation-of-powers" doctrine more common in democratic structures.

³⁸Wang and Bai, *Jiedao gongzuo yu jumin weiyuanhui jianshe*, 235.

³⁹Wang Jun, "Jumin huiyi de quanli xuyao de dao zunzhong" (The authority of the residents' assembly has to be respected), *Zhongguo shehuibao* (China Society Daily) (Beijing), September 21, 2006; Wang, *Juweihui yu shequ zhili*, 313.

introduced in several cities. This reform is intended to create three "layers" in the decision-making process: a deliberation layer (議事層), a decision layer (決策層), and an execution layer (操作層).

There are two basic models of "separation of legislation and execution." In the first model, the RC becomes a deliberative body, and the execution function is performed by a community work station (社區工作站) staffed by professional community workers. The RA remains the principal decision maker. The decision-making process works thus: the RC first deliberates the matters on hand and then submits proposals to the RA. If passed by the RA, the proposal goes to the community work station for direct execution by the community workers. Shanghai, Harbin, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen have experimented with this model.

In the second model, the RC is designated as the executive body and the RA as the decision-making body, but a new institution, the "deliberative council" (社區協商議事會), is created to perform the deliberation function. Most of the items raised during a meeting of the RA are first referred to the deliberative council before being decided at a further meeting of the RA. The RC is responsible for implementing these decisions. Shenyang and Qingdao are the cities that have used this model.⁴⁰

The community work station is designed to perform administrative duties, allowing the RC to focus on self-governance matters. In most instances, work station staff are recruited and paid by the street office. Some people even refer to it as a "dispatched office" of the street office. In some

⁴⁰I should add two caveats here. First, in either model, "separation of legislation and execution" does not mean that the RA does not have some deliberation functions (rather than just deciding on things deliberated by other bodies) or that the RC does not have some power in decision making (rather than being purely an executive or deliberative organ). Second, the two new institutions (community work stations and deliberative councils) are not mutually exclusive. For instances, a community governing structure could have a deliberative council that shares deliberation functions with the RC, while at the same time having a work station to aid the RC in the performance of its executive functions. The different role played by the RC (deliberation or execution) is the principal difference between the two models. See Wang, *Juweihui yu shequ zhili*, 184-85, 188-92, 314-15; Xu Yong and Chen Weidong, *Zhongguo chengshi shequ zizhi* (Self-governance in China's urban communities) (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 2002), 57-68; Shi Jun, "Lun juweihui chongzu" (On the reorganization of the residents' committee), *Shehui kexue* (Journal of Social Sciences) (Shanghai), no. 1 (2001): 43-46.

other localities, the RC appears to have more authority to recruit and promote community workers.⁴¹

A deliberative council generally includes delegates from the RC, homeowners' committees, work units located in the community, property companies, public security bureaus and "socially eminent persons" (社會知名人士, such as deputies to the local people's congress, successful business people, professionals, and celebrities).⁴² There are two models of the deliberative council. Under the first, it is a "substitute organ" (*daixing jiguan* 代行機關) for the RA when the RA is not in session. In this case, the deliberative council is empowered to perform most of the functions of the RA. Nominally still a "deliberative" unit and not a "decision-making" unit, in practice it can both deliberate and decide upon important matters. It also exercises the supervisory powers of the RA. The deliberative council can recommend the suspension and removal of officers of the RC.⁴³ Under the alternative model, the deliberative council is purely a "consultative body" (諮詢顧問機構). In this case, it is less powerful and more "deliberative" in line with its title. Its basic functions are thus consultation, coordination, and deliberation: it has no independent decision-making power and its recommendations are for reference purposes only, without the binding force of law.⁴⁴

Whether it is a "substitute organ" or a "consultative body," the deliberative council is in general a mechanism for formally including the political and social elite in the decision-making process.⁴⁵ Members of the

⁴¹Minzhengbu jiceng zhengquan he shequ jianshesi ketizu, "Guanyu 'shequ gongzuozhan' yao liqing naxie renshi" (Several clarifications regarding the "community work station"), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 2 (2007): 6-9.

⁴²Xu and Chen, *Zhongguo chengshi shequ zizhi*, 59.

⁴³See the case studies in *ibid.*, 183-89; and in Lin Shangli, ed. *Shequ minzhu yu zhili: anli yanjiu* (Community democracy and governance: case studies) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003), 198-230.

⁴⁴Deng Mingfen, "Lun shequ zizhi jin Cheng zhong chengshi jiceng zuzhi jianshe de xinsilu" (On the new ideas of urban grassroots organizational construction in the process of community self-governance), *Xuexi luntan* (Tribune of Study) (Zhengzhou), no. 1 (2007): 43-44.

⁴⁵Lin, *Shequ minzhu yu zhili: anli yanjiu*, 211.

deliberative council are almost exclusively people with higher than average socioeconomic status (business people or professionals) or those with a certain political status (district people's congress deputies, public security officers, party secretaries) whose activities extend beyond the community. The formal inclusion of the elite is useful in the sense that the political, economic, organizational, and social connections and resources of these elite members of society can be mobilized for purposes of community governance.⁴⁶ Furthermore, since the RC is only a "mass self-governance organization" without bureaucratic rank, having the social elite integrated into its decision-making structure serves to increase its authority, especially when dealing with higher-ranked work units within its jurisdiction.⁴⁷

Democratic Management

The 2005 white paper specifically mentions two types of quasi-legal document dealing with community self-governance in accordance with the "framework of the law": residents' self-governance charters (居民自治章程) and residents' agreements (居規民約 or 居民公約).

The idea behind democratic management is that in the sphere of "social self-governance" it is more appropriate for residents to come up with their own rules and regulations to which they will willingly adhere. Both residents' agreements and self-governance charters are designed to regulate behavior; they are more authoritative than mere social norms but less so than laws.⁴⁸ A residents' agreement is meant to oblige community residents to follow certain behavioral norms, mostly concerning trivial matters, such as keeping pets, littering and spitting, and car or bicycle parking. It therefore specifies what kinds of behavior are encouraged and what is

⁴⁶Meng Fanwu, "Xieshang yishi: suantian kula zhenbuyi" (Consultation and deliberation: joys, hardships, difficulties), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 2 (2002): 21-22.

⁴⁷Xu Qun and Zheng Li, "Shequ 'yishi weiyuanhui' neng daiti 'juweihui' ma?" (Can the community "deliberative council" replace the "residents' committee"?), *Liaowang xinwen zhoubao* (Outlook News Weekly) (Beijing), no. 6 (2002): 31.

⁴⁸Wang Shihao, "Shequ jumin gongyue yu shequ jumin zizhi zhangcheng yousha qubie?" (What are the differences between residents' agreements and residents' self-governance charters?), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 6 (2001): 24.

discouraged.⁴⁹ Typically a residents' agreement is a very short document, containing several sentences that are easy to memorize.⁵⁰

The drafting of a residents' agreement can be initiated by any resident. In one example, a resident of a community in Shanghai came up with a draft agreement for his apartment building and then solicited the opinions of his neighbors through meetings of small groups of residents and a house-hold survey. The draft and the solicited opinions were then submitted to the RC. The RC organized discussion groups and came up with a second draft, then invited residents to contribute their ideas to this second draft. After several revisions, the third and final draft became the residents' agreement.⁵¹

A self-governance charter is a much more systematic, developed, and comprehensive document. It is supposedly drafted directly by community residents and should take into account government policies and laws as well as local community conditions. As a quasi-legal document, a self-governance charter in effect amounts to a "community constitution."⁵² Such a charter covers the following aspects of community self-governance: (1) the governance framework and organizational structure, including the division of authority and responsibilities among the various community bodies; (2) the nature, rights, obligations, and responsibilities of each of these bodies; and (3) the basic rules and procedures for the management of community affairs, especially the management of the public budget and finances.⁵³ The drafting procedure usually consists of several steps, with

⁴⁹Wang and Bai, *Jiedao gongzuo yu jumin weiyuanhui jianshe*, 241-44.

⁵⁰In some instances, it is written in verse form and can be sung. For examples, see the residents' agreements collected in Ding Lei and Zhong Hua, "Shanghaishi Luwanqu 'jumin gongyue' xuandeng" (Selected compilation of "residents' agreements" in the Luwan district of Shanghai), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 24 (2003): 38.

⁵¹Xie Jian, "'Louzu jumin gongyue' jumin ziji ding" (Residents draft their own "building residents' agreement"), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 23 (2006): 14.

⁵²Xu and Chen, *Zhongguo chengshi shequ zizhi*, 170-71.

⁵³See the self-governance charters published in the magazine *Shequ*. "Beijingshi Xisibeitoutiao shequ jumin weiyuanhui zhangcheng" (Residents' committee charter in Xisibeitoutiao Community, Beijing), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 3 (2003): 33-34; "Xiamenshi Huliqū Dianqian jiedao Xinglong shequ zizhi zhangcheng" (The self-governance charter of Xinglong community, Dianqian street, Huli district, Xiamen), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 2 (2001): 24-25.

the RC playing a central role as the initiator of the charter. These steps are: (1) the RC educates residents about the necessity of the charter; (2) study groups are organized to discuss the national constitution and relevant laws so that the charter will not contradict them; (3) meetings of residents' small groups are convened to discuss the charter; (4) a first draft is formulated; (5) residents' opinions about the draft are solicited; (6) the RA is convened to make changes and approve the draft; and (7) the approved draft of the charter is publicized and submitted to the superior authorities. A copy of the charter will then be mailed to each household.⁵⁴

Democratic Supervision

One Japanese scholar has argued that increasing government transparency and accountability and giving citizens the "right to information" are important hallmarks of the political reform initiatives of the Hu-Wen administration.⁵⁵ One might disagree with this opinion given the prevalent tightening of control over information in China. Nevertheless, the Chinese government in the past few years does appear to be trying to make some selected information about the government and its policies more easily accessible through the policy of "government openness" (政務公開). "Residents' committee openness" (居務公開) is the community governance equivalent of this. It aims to make information regarding the finances (including proposed and actual budgets, grants, collected fees, spending, debts, etc.), operations, procedures, work progress, and decisions of RCs easily available to the public. Other more specific information that should be open to scrutiny includes the processing of permit applications requiring RC approval, lists of recipients of welfare funds and food ration coupons, the use (including the sale, construction on, and management of) public land, the distribution of emergency and welfare resources, family planning

⁵⁴Xu and Chen, *Zhongguo chengshi shequ zizhi*, 172-73.

⁵⁵Kojima Tomoyuki, "China's Political Governance: Transformation from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao," in *Restructuring China: Party, State and Society after the Reform and Open Door*, ed. Nakagane Katsuji and Kojima Tomoyuki (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 2006), 210.

work, and any other issues residents deem appropriate.⁵⁶

The issue of land is an issue of particular concern for residents of communities that were originally villages, since the RCs in these areas have inherited the collective land owned by the previous village committees. Hence, land deals, land ownership, compensation for loss of land, and profits and debts associated with land are important items to be disclosed under this practice of open management.⁵⁷ In one example, an RC on the edge of the urban area of Shantou had inherited certain pieces of land and derived income from them. Alleged mismanagement by the RC created tensions between the RC and the residents. As a result, an open management system was implemented so that residents were able to participate in the supervision of these land deals. Openness in RC affairs was thus able to reduce tensions and promote stability and democratic accountability.⁵⁸

Assessing Grassroots Democracy in Urban China

Although the official data on elections in tables 1 and 2 reveal signs of improvement, they do not tell us how well these elections were conducted. They may have been clean and fair, or they may have been subject to official manipulation. The reality on the ground is certainly less hopeful than the optimistic projections of the MCA. While the electoral reforms have undoubtedly led to more choice in elections of RC officers, the au-

⁵⁶Zhang Jinliang and He Zhijun, "Juwu gongkai, daodi ying gongkai xiesha?" (Openness in RC affairs, what should be disclosed?), *Zhongguo minzheng* (China Civil Affairs) (Beijing), no. 4 (2001): 41; Liu Anshen and Cui Jindi, "Baoji Weibin qu quanmian shixing juwu gongkai" (Weibin district of Baoji comprehensively implements openness in RC affairs), *Zhongguo shehuibao* (China Society Daily), August 26, 2004; Zhang Tao, "Sichuansheng minzhengting yaoqiu kangzhen jiuzai zijin wuzhi shixing chun (ju) wu gongkai" (The civil affairs bureau of Sichuan demands the implementation of openness in RC and village affairs in the quake rescue efforts), *Zhongguo shehuibao* (China Society Daily), June 24, 2008.

⁵⁷"Kaifachu shixing juwu gongkai minzhu guanli" (Implementing openness in RC affairs and democratic management in new areas), *Qingdao ribao* (Qingdao Daily), September 17, 2006.

⁵⁸Hong Yuehao, "Yi juwu gongkai cu hexie wending" (Using openness in RC affairs to promote harmonious stability), *Shantou ribao* (Shantou Daily), October 17, 2005.

thorities may still manipulate the electoral process in other ways, especially through the election committee, the body in charge of organizing elections. In one example in Wuhan, the election committee was blatantly staffed by people in alliance with the party and government authorities, and they ensured that the election results reflected the preferences of the authorities, not the residents.⁵⁹ In another case, the election committee in charge of an RC election in Shanghai felt that there were not enough party members on the preliminary list of candidates nominated by the residents' representatives. It therefore sought to "encourage" or "guide" the nomination of party members by several residents' representatives who had yet to make up their minds.⁶⁰ The replacement of "non-competitive" (等額) elections with "competitive" (差額) elections might create the impression that these elections are more democratic. However, some local authorities have simply disqualified able, self-nominated candidates who were the potential rivals of candidates preferred by the authorities. The strategy was to field unqualified, weak candidates alongside capable official candidates in a "competitive" election, giving residents only a limited choice between a capable official candidate and a weak independent candidate.⁶¹

Democratic reform of the public administration aspect of the RA system is also in need of adjustment. Instead of strengthening democratic decision making, the two new institutions (the community work station and the deliberative council) could have the effect of weakening the RC and the RA, under the rubric of "separation of legislation and execution."⁶² The

⁵⁹See the manipulation of an RC election reported in Zhang Mingyu and Liu Zhichang, "Shi shei zai yingxiang juweihui zhixuan" (Who is influencing the RC election?), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 8 (2005): 30-31; see also Gui, Cheng, and Ma, "Cultivation of Grass-roots Democracy."

⁶⁰Lin Shangli and Ma Yili, *Shequ zuzhi yu juweihui jianshe* (Community organization and construction of residents' committees) (Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe, 2000), 198.

⁶¹Zhang Honggang, "Jumin zizhi yin zhixuan er shengdong" (Residents' self-governance is revitalized due to direct elections), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 7 (2005): 18.

⁶²The work station might in practice also takes over the de facto powers of the RC, making it irrelevant whether the RC is democratically elected or not. The deliberative council has also significantly diluted the authority of the RA, since it is empowered to do most of the things the RA does. Since members of the council are exclusively from the elite, it can hardly claim to be more democratic than the RA. One Chinese scholar has criticized the

usefulness of residents' agreements and self-governance charters in enhancing democratic management also remains doubtful. A lot of residents are less than enthusiastic about these documents. They are difficult to enforce, and they often only constrain those who are willing to abide by them.⁶³ There may not be as much popular involvement in the drafting process of these documents as is claimed.⁶⁴ As for "openness in RC affairs," this form of democratic supervision is still undeveloped. For example, although the RC is required to open its books for inspection, no sanctions are specified for refusing to do so. In this sense, the effectiveness of "open management" largely depends on the willingness of the RC to vigorously implement it.

In addition, the RCs also face some inherent problems that limit their democratic autonomy. As illustrated in the previous section, under the community construction policy, the RC has been given numerous administrative tasks and responsibilities which inevitably make it a government-oriented organization, despite the rhetoric of democratic autonomy that surrounds the policy. Furthermore, the emergence of another body, the homeowners' committee (業主委員會, hereafter HC) also has presented the RC with a challenge. HCs emerged from the housing policy reform which permitted urban residents buy real estate on the private market rather than having it allocated to them through their work units. The HCs are the principal, officially-sanctioned bodies through which homeowners can protect their rights and interests. Urban residents who are homeowners tend to show more interest in the HCs, which they see as their own organi-

deliberative council as "illegitimate" and "impairing the real reforms of the RC." See Wang, *Juweihui yu shequ zhili*, 314-15.

⁶³Yu Yiqing, "Jumin gongyue' de gongxindu weihe zhubu xiajiang?" (Why has the credibility of the "residents' agreement" been declining?), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 23 (2006): 10.

⁶⁴The author of one study of villagers' self-governance charters (comparable documents in the villages) concludes that these charters reflect the will of the state more than that of villagers. The villagers did not actually write the initial draft of the document but merely commented on a "standard draft" provided by the government. It is quite possible that in reality, urban residents also play only a minor role in the drafting process of the self-governance charter. See Yu Jianrong, "Shifan de qiyue" (Ineffectual contract), *Zhongguo nongcun guancha* (China Rural Survey) (Beijing), no. 1 (2001): 64-69.

zations, than they do in RCs, which are widely perceived as governmental bodies.⁶⁵

The above critical assessment of urban grassroots democracy is not meant to completely write off efforts to make the RC a more democratic organization. The flawed democratic process, as problematic as it may be, does serve to routinize the process of democratic elections in China. However, before we characterize the RC as a force for democracy in the future, we should look at the other aspect of this institution—its historic role as an important tool of the regime in disciplining, controlling, indoctrinating, monitoring, and mobilizing the people.

The Residents' Committee: Mobilization, Stability, Control

One of the first tasks of the RCs when they were founded in Hangzhou in 1950 was to carry out population registration, and in this they performed a commendable job. They were able to survey over one hundred and twenty thousand households and categorize them as either—in the regime's terms—"good" (revolutionary activists, workers, etc.) or "bad" (criminals, KMT members, religious activists, etc.). Families in the "bad" category were to be subject to "special control" (特控), monitored constantly by the RCs and the public security organs.⁶⁶

Thus, from their very beginning there was a close working relationship between the RCs and the local public security bureaus, street offices, and local party organizations, and this relationship put a "pervasive and overwhelming public pressure" on every individual.⁶⁷ Each RC was responsible for forming a local security committee comprised of neighbor-

⁶⁵For more on the homeowners' organizations, see Benjamin Read, "Democratizing the Neighborhood? New Private Housing and Homeowner Self-Organization in Urban China," *China Journal*, no. 14 (January 2003): 31-59.

⁶⁶James Z. Gao, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou: The Transformation of City and Cadre, 1949-1954* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 138-40.

⁶⁷John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 368-69. See also Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, 378.

hood activists and led by an officer of the RC. The main job of this security committee was to keep an eye on the neighborhood and report suspicious activities to the police. Spying on and denunciation of neighbors by officers of the RC were not uncommon.⁶⁸ Jerome Cohen, an American expert on the Chinese criminal justice system, writes that this civilian security committee was able to bring surveillance "down to the level of the individual household, a task that the police alone could not perform."⁶⁹ One expert on China's intelligence apparatus comments that the RC is one of the "fundamental building blocks in domestic intelligence" in China.⁷⁰ A memoir written by a dissident who participated in the 1989 Tiananmen protests mentioned that in the aftermath of the crackdown, "all residents' committees and police in each city went house to house to check on the people in each family."⁷¹

The RC has also been a major mobilization tool in the service of various campaigns, such as the "three anti's" and the "five anti's."⁷² During the Cultural Revolution, the RC was one of the principal channels through which urban youth were transferred to rural areas in the 1968 "up to the mountains, down to the villages" campaign.⁷³ Mobilization did not always have political goals. One former RC officer recalled that public sanitation and health campaigns were more frequent than political campaigns.⁷⁴ These campaigns were a crude but effective method of accomplishing policy goals.⁷⁵

⁶⁸Meisner, *Mao's China and After*, 90.

⁶⁹Jerome Cohen, *The Criminal Process in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1963: An Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 19-20.

⁷⁰Nicholas Eftimiades, *Chinese Intelligence Operations* (Tokyo: Toppan Press, 1995), 44.

⁷¹See Zhang Boli, *The Long Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002), 89.

⁷²Frederic Wakeman, Jr., "'Cleanup': The New Order in Shanghai," in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 57.

⁷³Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), 85.

⁷⁴Michael Frolic, *Mao's People: Sixteen Portraits of Life in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 228.

⁷⁵One Chinese writer describes how during a pest elimination campaign, each family was

Does the RC still have the same kind of stability maintenance and mobilization capabilities and functions in the reform era? Given that campaign-style politics has been in rapid decline since the end of Mao's rule, we have to answer this question by looking at the RC during moments of crisis, when the party-state perceives its rule and legitimacy to be at stake and when it is committed to the full use of its resources. Below, I will use two case studies to examine the role of the RC in two separate campaigns. The material used in the analysis of these cases consists of internal publications and some propaganda materials. This does not mean that I fully accept the analysis and judgment of the party. But these materials are useful in the sense that they reveal the party's perspective and understanding of events and help to explain the party's policies and strategies.

The Falungong Crisis, 1999-2005

In the early hours of April 25, 1999, thousands of followers of the Falungong (法輪功) spiritual movement converged on Tiananmen Square for the largest demonstration since the 1989 students' movement. Party leaders were shocked and angered by this overt challenge to their authority. In July, top level leaders ordered one of the harshest crackdowns in the history of the People's Republic. In this case study, I will discuss the role the residents' committees played in this campaign against Falungong.

Falungong is a complex, quasi-religious organization that had its roots in the Chinese craze for *qigong* (氣功) in the 1980s and 1990s. Before the crackdown in July 1999, the government had been urged from some quarters to ban the organization on the grounds of its "superstitious" beliefs. Since the crackdown, the official view of Falungong has been that it is an evil cult whose followers were fooled into believing the "ridiculous and evil teachings" of its founder, Li Hongzhi (李洪志). The official analysis of the rise of Falungong thus began with the question why, after so many

required to present evidence of compliance to the RC, such as chopped-off tails. See Chen Chen and Ted King, *Come Watch the Sun Go Home* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1998), 98.

years of atheist education, so many people were still susceptible to a movement such as this.

The main explanation offered by the party was that Falungong adherents tended to be people who were unable to cope with the tremendous social transformation and modernization going on in China at that time. Many of them had held secure positions in the pre-reform socialist institutions (such as laid-off workers and cadres), but found themselves marginalized during the reform era. The conclusion was that social and psychological pressures generated by market reforms had led to a loss of faith in existing ideology and institutions and prompted a search for an alternative paradigm that would offer a better life. Some retired state and party cadres, assuming their "useful lives" to be at an end, found themselves at a loss in a society that was changing rapidly. Religious beliefs, including those of Falungong, were believed to have expanded their influence for these reasons.⁷⁶ One important finding of this kind of sociological analysis of Falungong was that many of its practitioners were concentrated in urban neighborhoods and communities and cut off from work units. This finding seems to have been confirmed by studies carried out by the authorities on practitioners they were able to capture and detain. One of the main conclusions coming from these studies was that Falungong practitioners generally shared the psychological traits of poor efficacy, loneliness, "feudalistic superstition" rooted in traditional culture, a sense of the meaninglessness of life, "absurd" belief in the power of breathing exercises as an alternative to modern medicine, and even mental instability and illness. Many practitioners, the authorities claimed, were people with various health problems. They felt neglected in a rapidly industrializing (and alienating) society, and were looking for more companionship and care from other peo-

⁷⁶Guo Yongsheng, "Falungong' xiejiao de shehuixue fenxi yu sikao" (A sociological analysis of and thoughts on the "Falungong" cult), *Nanjing zhengzhi xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Nanjing Institute of Politics), no. 3 (2001): 28-30; Zhang Wanli, "Falungong' xianxiang de shehui chengyin" (The social factors contributing to the Falungong phenomenon), in *Falungong xianxiang pingxi* (Analysis of the Falungong phenomenon), ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan "Falungong" xianxiang zonghe yanjiu ketizu (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2001), 248-50.

ple. These needs were allegedly fulfilled when they practiced Falungong exercises together with friends, family members, and neighbors.⁷⁷

Thus, from the party's perspective, urban neighborhoods were a hotbed of Falungong influence. Practitioners from the same community would gather and practice together in the community open areas. The authorities concluded that "the format of organizational activities, composition of membership, and channels of communication" of Falungong exhibited strong community characteristics.⁷⁸ The official Chinese portrayal of the Falungong movement is that of a tightly organized and disciplined organization with a hierarchical structure mimicking the administrative divisions of the government. The relationship between the organizational structure of the Falungong movement, the administrative divisions of China, and the organizational structure of the anti-Falungong campaign are set out in table 3.

The more than twenty-eight thousand grassroots Falungong practice sites were therefore the lowest-level "battlefields" in the struggle between the CCP and Falungong. Given that Falungong is a largely urban phenomenon and that most of its practitioners were retirees or laid-off workers detached from their work units, it is reasonable to assume that most of these practice sites were located in urban communities. The view that Falungong tended to spread through urban communities was endorsed in an internal publication issued by the State Council Office for Preventing and Dealing

⁷⁷Sichuan sheng zonghe zhili Falungong duice yanjiu ketizu, "Toushi yu shenjiu: dui Falungong chimizhe xianxiang de diaocha yu fenxi" (Looking through and deep investigation: an investigation and analysis of the phenomenon of Falungong believers), *Shehui kexue yanjiu* (Social Science Research) (Chengdu), no. 5 (2001): 105; Yan Zhenggang, ed., *Renqing xiejiao, zouchu moqu: guanyu chuli falungong wenti xuexi jiaoyu duben* (Know the evil cult, leave the evil domain: a learner-educational reader on how to deal with the Falungong problem) (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng chuli falungong wenti lingdao xiaozu bangongshi, 2000), 189-99; Liu Yuanchao and Wang Tong'an, eds., *Zhongguo shehui zhuanxingqi xiejiao wenti shizheng yanjiu ji fangzhi duice* (An empirical study of cult issues during China's social transformation and prevention countermeasures) (Changchun: Jilin renmin chubanshe, 2005), 60-62, 80-90.

⁷⁸Meng Jianmin et al., "Guanyu fangfan 'Falungong,' jiaqiang shequ guanli de sikao" (On the prevention of "Falungong" and the strengthening of community management), *Hebei jianzhu keji xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Hebei Institute of Architectural Science and Technology), no. 4 (2002): 63-64.

Table 3
Organizational Structure of Falungong and Anti-Falungong Organizations

Administrative divisions	Falungong's organizational structure	Organizational structure of the 610 offices
National Capital	<i>Falun Dafa</i> Research Society	Office of the Central Leading Group for Dealing with Falungong Question (National 610 Office)
Provinces	Main stations (39)	Provincial 610 Offices
Prefectures/Cities	Branch stations	Municipal 610 Offices
Counties/Urban Districts	Guidance stations (19,00)	County/District 610 Offices
Towns/Street Offices	Practice sites (28,000)	Township/Street Working Offices on Falungong
Villages/Urban Communities/Work Units		Assistance and Education Small Groups (<i>Bangjiao xiaozu</i>)
Groups of People	Study groups	
Individuals	Practitioners	

Sources: Based on James Tong, "An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong: Structure, Communications, Financing," *China Quarterly*, no. 171 (September 2002): 643; James Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999-2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137-55.

with the Question of Cults (國務院防範和處理邪教問題辦公室). This book argues that community construction must include a campaign against Falungong and other cults. Local party leaders from Shanghai, Shandong, Tianjin, Zhejiang, and other provinces all supported carrying on the struggle against Falungong through community work. Zhang Dejiang (張德江), who was at that time the party secretary of Zhejiang province and who is now a party secretary of Chongqing municipality, stated that "communities are base units of cities, frontlines in the struggle against Falungong, places for implementing various anti-Falungong measures."⁷⁹ Some data col-

⁷⁹*Qizhua gongguan, chanchu xiejiao: chengshi shequ dang zuzhi tong xiejiao falungong douzheng cailiao xuanbian* (Make a concerted effort to crush the cults: selection of materials on the struggle against Falungong by urban community party organizations) (Beijing: Guowuyuan fangfan he chuli xiejiao wenti bangongshi, 2001), 4.

Table 4
Survey Data on Personal Relationships between Falungong Practitioners

Relationships	Number of practitioners	Percentage
Classmates	7	1.2
Colleagues	17	2.9
Relatives	16	2.8
Fellow townsmen (<i>tongxiang</i>)	62	10.7
Neighbors	93	16.1
Acquaintances during practices	270	46.8
All kinds of relationships	78	13.5
Others	34	5.9
Invalid answers	28	
Total	605	100

Table 5
Survey Data on Methods of Organizing Practice Sites

Methods of Organizing a practice site	Number of practitioners	Percentage
Self-organizing based on residential areas	265	51.1
Self-organizing with interested fellow practitioners	11	2.1
Organizing according to the instructions of station officers	9	1.7
Looking for practice sites according to one's need	159	30.6
Not sure	58	11.2
Others	17	3.3
Invalid answers	86	
Total	605	100

Sources: Liu and Wang, eds., *Zhongguo shehui zhuanxingqi xiejiao wenti*, 124-25.

lected by the authorities in 2001 on Falungong practitioners detained in Tianjin also appear to confirm the relationship between communities and Falungong practice sites (see tables 4 and 5).

As these data show, practicing with neighbors in residential areas was one of the main activities of Falungong followers. For this reason, the authorities had to ensure that the official community organizations (i.e., the

RCs) were part of their harsh campaign to root out Falungong from urban communities.

James Tong's *Revenge of the Forbidden City*, by far the most authoritative analysis of China's anti-Falungong campaign,⁸⁰ pays scant attention to the role of the RCs and community party organizations. Arguably, the RCs were not the main protagonists in this battle but played only a supporting role. However, the party-state's long-term program for rooting out Falungong did require the RCs to be vigilant and persistent in monitoring and controlling former practitioners or potential recruits.

As stated above, the official diagnosis of the Falungong movement pointed to the social, physical, and psychological pressures experienced by the practitioners during a time of radical change in Chinese society. Presumably, with adequate assistance, counseling, and education, they could be "cured" of their adherence to Falungong. The party's analysis of the movement differentiated between its relatively small number of "disciples," who would require more coercive treatment by the security apparatus, and the majority rank-and-file membership who could be "cured" through social work and psychological assistance programs. The foot soldiers in this battle between the authorities and Falungong were the *bangjiao* (幫教, assistance and education) workers. *Bangjiao* is a quasi-judicial, community-based correctional program designed to monitor, control, assist, and educate those whose offenses do not warrant criminal punishment or dispatch to "reform-through-labor" camps. The usual targets of *bangjiao* programs include drug addicts, juvenile delinquents, and prisoners released on probation or on medical grounds. The correctional approach of *bangjiao* relies on a combination of family, *bangjiao* specialists, and community watch personnel to ensure that people in the program undergo successful attitudinal and behavioral changes and are integrated back into society.⁸¹ Each community is supposed to have a "*bangjiao* small

⁸⁰James Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999-2005* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸¹For the background of China's *bangjiao* system, see Ma Jie, "Lun bangjiao gongzuo" (On assistance and education work), *Zhengzhi yu falü* (Politics and Law) (Shanghai) 3 (1985):

group" (幫教小組) consisting of officers of the RC, community party leaders, public security officers, bangjiao workers, and community volunteers. The small group is responsible for registering each *bangjiao* target (幫教對象) and paying them regular visits. The small group also has to check on the progress of each target and help them find employment. In particular, community *bangjiao* has been seen as an important tool for maintaining stability. As an RC officer working on *bangjiao* has said: "We are doing something very important and good. We pull people out of their mess (把失足的人從泥潭裡拉出來) and reduce danger and instability in our society and increase harmony and stability."⁸²

The community *bangjiao* program emerged as a key institution in the anti-Falungong campaign. Rank-and-file Falungong practitioners who had been released from detention and were deemed to have been "cured" were placed under the surveillance of the community *bangjiao* program. According to a report produced by the Shanghai party committee, community surveillance made it easier for the party's security personnel to watch over ex-practitioners, who were described as "monitored targets" (防範對象), since it was carried out by people living within their residential areas.⁸³ In Henan, the party committee of Luoyang city reported how *bangjiao* personnel would pay repeated visits to ex-Falungong practitioners. This was called "recurrent assistance and education" (回訪幫教). The practitioners would be urged to write accounts of their renunciation of Falungong. *Bangjiao* personnel would engage with them as if they were close friends.⁸⁴

One local party committee in Beijing suggested that the trinity of the street office, the police station, and the RC constituted an effective framework for preventative measures (防範措施). Under the coordination (牽頭協調) of the street office, the police station was the principal actor (主體)

15-19; Dai Yiyun, "Qianxi woguo de bangjiao zhidu" (Preliminary analysis of China's assistance and education system), *Qingnian yanjiu* (Youth Studies) (Beijing) 5 (1988): 46-48.

⁸²Zhao Fengcai, "Danshan shequ bangjiao gongzuo de sige zhuanbian" (Four changes in Danshan Community's assistance and education work), *Shequ* (Community) (Beijing), no. 18 (2009): 38.

⁸³*Qizhua gongguan*, 38.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 139-40.

and the RC was the "backbone" (骨幹) of this preventative framework.⁸⁵ In several localities in Shanghai, preventative measures were carried out by the street party committee, which assumed overall leadership (抓全面), and the functional bureaus of the street office, which took responsibility for the communities under the jurisdiction of the street office, while community party organizations, residents' committees, and housing block party leaders were in charge of directly overseeing individual practitioners (包人).⁸⁶

Apart from monitoring through *bangjiao* programs, a more long-term and strategic solution consisted of nurturing a sustainable "healthy" community culture and activities designed to direct community residents away from superstitious teachings and the influence of Falungong and/or other potential cults. Viewed from this perspective, the community construction policy may be interpreted as an embodiment of the party-state's determination to strengthen community forces against the challenges posed by these errant influences. The RCs were given the task of organizing such activities as physical exercise sessions, badminton or ping-pong matches, the screening of patriotic movies, language classes, singing classes, Tai-Chi and other permissible *qigong* exercises, and hobby clubs. Such seemingly innocuous activities were actually part of the campaign against Falungong. It was believed that as permissible community activities flourished under the auspices of the RC, urban residents, especially those officially diagnosed as being particularly susceptible to cult teachings (retirees, people with health issues, etc.), would stay away from Falungong. These officially organized activities could serve the strategic purpose of "occupying the practice sites of Falungong and squeezing out Falungong activities."⁸⁷ In the military terminology used by the party, this amounted to "taking up position in the fields of mass ideology and culture" (佔領群眾的思想文化陣地).⁸⁸

⁸⁵Haidianqu Yangfangdian jiedao gongwei, "Lingdao zhe yao dang mingbairan, bangjiaozhe yao zuo rexinren: qiantan yu 'falungong' douzheng de tihui" (Sensible leaders, enthusiastic *bangjiao* workers: discussions on understanding the struggle with "Falungong"), *Qianyan* (Forward Position) (Beijing), no. 12 (2001): 25.

⁸⁶*Qizhua gongguan*, 7.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁸Yan Zhenggang, *Renqing xiejiao, zouchu moqu*, 223.

Faced with the full force of China's party-state, Falungong has been especially hard hit. Despite its impressive resilience outside of China, Falungong has probably been defeated within the country, although the party has yet to achieve a decisive victory. The residents' committee is one of the institutions that the party has deployed in this battle, and it is still an integral part of the party's effort to eliminate the influence of Falungong from urban communities.

The SARS Crisis, 2002-2003

Many political scientists have taken an interest in the 2002-2003 epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), when both the strengths and weaknesses of China's political system were exposed. Scholars outside of China have highlighted several shortcomings of the system during the SARS crisis, including the opaque system of information control and collection, conflicting bureaucratic and institutional arrangements, fragmented authority, the lack of communication between civilian and military institutions, the central-local divide, and the appalling public health infrastructure. They have nevertheless acknowledged that once the party-state had decided to fully mobilize all its resources to tackle the crisis, the results were impressive.⁸⁹ Somewhat surprisingly, scholars working inside China have reached similar conclusions. They have pointed out the same problems in the political system that contributed to the emergence and exacerbation of the crisis, although they have also tended to emphasize the strengths of the system, and some scholars have even claimed that the eventual containment of the epidemic demonstrated the superiority of China's socialist political structure.⁹⁰

⁸⁹See the chapters by Zheng Yongnian and Lye Liang Fook, and by Lai Hongyi in John Wong and Zheng Yongnian, eds., *The SARS Epidemic: Challenges to China's Crisis Management* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2004), 45-97; Tony Saich, "Is SARS China's Chernobyl or Much A do A about Nothing?" in *SARS in China: Prelude to Pandemic*, ed. Arthur Kleinman and James L. Watson (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 71-104.

⁹⁰Wuhan daxue fazhan yanjiuyuan SARS yanjiu ketizu, *SARS tiaozhan Zhongguo: SARS shiyi dui Zhongguo gaige yu fazhan de yingxiang* (SARS challenges China: the influence of the SARS epidemic on China's reform and development) (Wuhan: Wuhan daxue chubanshe, 2003), 128-58; Fang Ning and Yun Jie, eds., *Tufa shijian zhong de gonggong*

During the course of the epidemic, China went from being criticized to being praised by international health experts for having the determination and commitment to end the health crisis. Some World Health Organization (WHO) experts noted the community-based, "complicated and intricate web of surveillance" that uses "traditional neighborhood community unit[s]" that are unique to China.⁹¹ These "community units" were the village committees and residents' committees. Unsurprisingly, Chinese authors also contend that "the RC, as a coordination unit and the community organization for families and individuals, played vitally important functions in containing and preventing the spread of the disease."⁹²

As they had been in the Falungong crisis, urban communities were once again characterized as "battlefields" and "lines of defense" in a "people's war," this time against SARS.⁹³ Judging from reports coming from China, overall, the RCs did not disappoint. They displayed impressive mobilization and organizational capabilities once they had received the order to use all means necessary to contain the epidemic. They controlled and monitored the movements of migrant workers, inspected, questioned, and isolated people who exhibited SARS symptoms, set up checkpoints, distributed medicines and disinfectants, monitored the entrances to their residential compounds, distributed information about the crisis provided by the government, and cleaned up their neighborhoods.⁹⁴ The RCs were an integral part of the organizational structure of SARS containment in many cities. The organizational role of the residents' committees in the SARS

guanli: "feidian" zhihou de fansi (Public management during the emergency situation: reflections after SARS) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2005).

⁹¹"WHO Experts in China Praise 'Unique' SARS Surveillance System," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, May 13, 2003.

⁹²Wen Qingyun, *Kangji feidian: Beijing shequ baoweizhan* (Resisting SARS: battles in a Beijing community) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2003), 127.

⁹³Xin Yang, ed., *Kangji feidian: baochi gongchandangyuan xianjinxing xuexi duben* (Resisting SARS: a learner's reader on maintaining the progressiveness of communist party members) (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 2003), 21.

⁹⁴Patricia M. Thornton, "Crisis and Governance: SARS and the Resilience of the Chinese Body Politic," *China Journal*, no. 61 (January 2009): 42-43; "Zhongguo juweihui chengwei kang 'feidian' shenglijun" (China's residents' committees become new forces resisting SARS), *Cankao xiaoxi* (Reference News), May 17, 2003, 1.

Figure 1
SARS Prevention Organizational Network in Shanghai

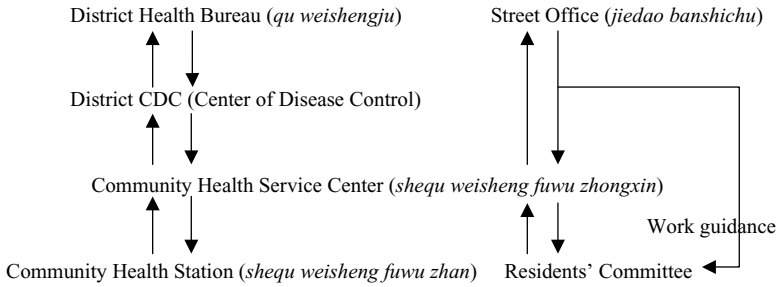
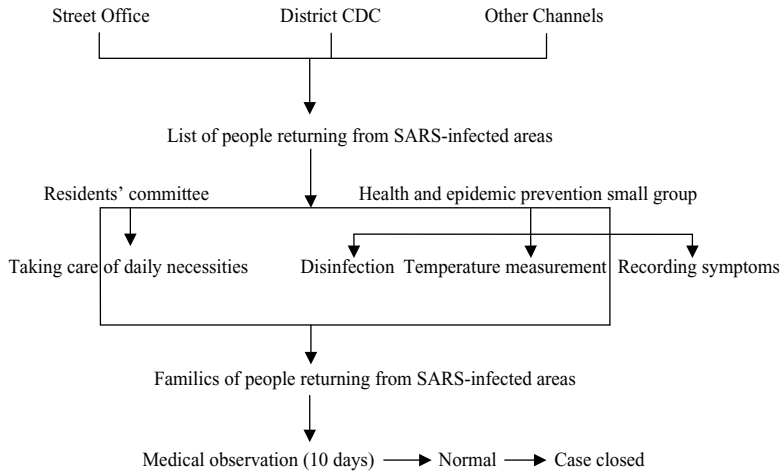


Figure 2
Process of Monitoring People Returning from SARS-infected Areas



Source: Bao Yong et al., "Gouzhu shequ yingdui tufa gonggong weisheng shijian changxiao fangfan jizhi: Shanghai Shi SARS shequ fangfan de sikao" (Constructing an effective community mechanism of public health crisis prevention: thoughts on community prevention of SARS in Shanghai), *Zhongguo quanke yixue* (Chinese General Practice) (Handan) 8, no. 6 (2003): 653-54.

prevention framework in Shanghai is presented in figures 1 and 2.

The RCs in Shanghai were responsible for helping isolated residents suspected of having SARS symptoms and assisting medical professionals

in the daily observation and quarantine of these people. The collaboration between community health centers and the RCs in terms of the communication of critical information, surveillance and inspection, and preventative work in suspected disease locations was therefore cited as the main reason for the successful containment of SARS in China.⁹⁵

The anti-SARS campaign in Beijing also underlined the importance of RCs. The street offices and RCs in Beijing formed elaborate networks within grassroots communities that extended the organizational reach of the state to every household and individual. The full force of mobilization was vividly felt when all units of the party, government, and even private enterprises (principally property management companies) within communities were ordered to form a disease prevention network that would encompass every part of the community. Migrant workers and nonpermanent residents were thoroughly examined and registered. The RCs also had to present a more "human" face in this forceful mobilization, as their officers were in charge of looking after isolated residents with suspected SARS. Their work was therefore crucial to the maintenance of social stability.⁹⁶ (See table 6.)

Both the Falungong crisis and the SARS epidemic demonstrated that the Chinese party-state is still able to marshal tremendous resources through its sophisticated organizational network. The RC, far from being a rather dull, insignificant, trivial organization dealing with matters unrelated to the dynamic and vibrant life of the cities, is actually a forceful institution when it comes to mobilization in times of crisis and the maintenance of stability.

⁹⁵Bao Yong et al., "Gouzhu shequ yingdui tufa gonggong weisheng shijian changxiao fangfan jizhi: Shanghaishi SARS shequ fangfan de sikao" (Constructing an effective community mechanism of public health crisis prevention: thoughts on community prevention of SARS in Shanghai), *Zhongguo quanke yixue* (Chinese General Practitioner) (Handan) 8, no. 6 (2003): 653-54.

⁹⁶*Kangjifeidian: Beijing shequ baoweizhan*, 95-99, 116.

Table 6
SARS Prevention Work by Community Residents' Committees in Balijie Street, Beijing

Residents' Committee:	Work Objectives	Basic Demands	Organizational Arrangements
Establishment of an overall leadership small group on SARS prevention work, unification of command structure within the communities.	Effective prevention of SARS, protection of uninfected residents	Early prevention and regular temperature testing for uninfected residents	<u>Epidemic Surveillance and Control Team</u> : Surveillance and control of infected residents, collection of information
	Timely cutting off of channels of infection	Timely report, diagnosis and medical care for infected residents or suspected carriers	<u>Propaganda and education team</u> : propagate updated information on SARS, ideological-political work, collection of residents' opinions and demands, publicize heroic examples
	Timely isolation of suspected carriers and non-carriers of disease	Early investigation and timely isolation for people or places involved in contact with infected residents or suspected carriers	<u>Livelihood protection team</u> : serve and help the family members of isolated infected residents
	Maintenance of normal community life and order, social stability		<u>Security team</u> : ensure the social and political stability and security of community <u>Cleanliness and hygiene team</u> : ensure the disinfection and cleaning of neighborhood

Source: *Kangji feidian: Beijing shequ baoweizhan* (Resisting SARS: battles in a Beijing community) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2003), 71.

The Residents' Committee in Comparative Perspective

We should keep in mind the timeframe of the analysis presented here. The anti-Falungong campaign took place before the community construction policy, while the SARS epidemic broke out after the policy was initiated. The community construction policy, which purportedly strengthens and expands community democracy and the welfare of residents, does not seem to have made RC's any less useful as a tool for mobilization and the maintenance of stability. One acute observer of the community construction policy suggests that it appears to be a strategy for beefing up the RCs so that they can fulfill the role previously played by the work units.⁹⁷ Others point out that this policy serves to elevate the "political profile of [the RC] as an institutional device to re-impose control on a more mobile and heterogeneous [urban] society."⁹⁸ Community self-governance has given the authoritarian party-state entry into communities and allowed it to reorganize itself within them. What is ironic is that state capacity has been strengthened, while societal autonomy seems to have stagnated since the introduction of the community construction policy.⁹⁹ The communities affected by this policy are therefore not synonymous with civil society or civic communities in democratic societies. They should be understood rather as reconstructed administrative units heavily regulated by the party-state.¹⁰⁰ Scholars working inside China also acknowledge the limited impact of RC electoral reform on social autonomy. Instead, many of these reforms actually strengthen the integrative power of the party-state over the otherwise more autonomous social forces. The RC's "return to society" can

⁹⁷David Bray, "Building 'Community': New Strategies of Governance in Urban China," *Economy and Society* 35, no. 4 (November 2006): 530-49.

⁹⁸Wong and Poon, "From Serving Neighbors to Recontrolling Urban Society."

⁹⁹Geng Shu and Chen Yi Lin, "Zhongguo dalu de shequ zhili yu zhuanxing qianjing: fazhan cuzhuan huozhengquan weiwen?" (Community governance in mainland China and the prospects for transition: change through development or regime stability maintenance?), *Yuanjing jijinhui jikan* (Prospect Foundation Journal) (Taipei) 8, no. 1 (January 2007): 87-122.

¹⁰⁰Yan and Gao, "Social Engineering of Community Building."

only be completed with the growth of democratic constitutionalism in the state.¹⁰¹

This could be exactly what the party-state intends. No one would expect the RCs to become antigovernment forces just because they are more "freely" elected and have a higher level of popular participation right now. In fact, the party clearly intended the opposite when it decided to permit more community democracy; its aim was to secure more trust and support for the CCP.¹⁰² In this sense, it is fruitful to briefly consider the RC from a comparative perspective.

Although some features of the RC are unique to China, some comparable organizations do exist in other societies as well. Grassroots institutions serving the purposes of control and mobilization for an authoritarian state, while at the same time providing an avenue for popular participation in dealing with local matters and for creating neighborliness and a sense of community in an otherwise repressive political structure, are to be found in the institutions of *rukun tetangga/rukun warga* (hereafter RT/RW) in Indonesia and in local community organizations in Singapore.

Similar to China's RCs, the community organizations in Singapore (including community centers, residents' consultative councils, and residents' committees) also serve to consolidate support for the government through "controlled participation and mobilization." Even more so than China, these networks of organizations are centralized under the control of a national body: the People's Association. Centralized control with a decentralized structure thus achieves two political functions: extension of the political center's links with local citizenry, and the marginalization of potential local rivals of the center. As is the case in China where community party branches and the RCs are highly integrated with each other, the community organizations are major channels through which local branches of

¹⁰¹Guo Shengli et al., "Huigui zizhi? Huigui shehui?" (Back to self-governance? Back to society?), in *Shanghai zhengzhixue luntan* 5 (Shanghai Political Science Forum 5), ed. Shanghai shi zhengzhixuehui (Shanghai Political Science Association) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2009), 160-78.

¹⁰²Heberer, "Institutional Change and Legitimacy via Urban Elections?" 96.

the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) communicate and mobilize support. Together they extend the state's tentacles deep into society, allowing PAP to sustain its support and legitimacy year after year.¹⁰³

A more comparable organization to China's RC is the Indonesian RT/RW. These bodies were widespread in both rural and urban areas under the New Order authoritarian regime of President Suharto (1965-98), performing control, indoctrination, propaganda, monitoring, and mobilization functions. Much like China's RCs, local security committees were organized under the auspices of the RT/RW, and these committees paid particular attention to dissidents and opponents of the regime. At the same time, the RT/RW was also allowed certain "pseudo-democratic" processes such as elections of leaders and free deliberation of local matters. Nevertheless, much of the electoral mobilization was geared toward support of Golkar, the ruling party at the time. The collapse of the New Order regime did not bring an end to these grassroots bodies. The new democratic regime abolished the compulsory establishment of RT/RW in local communities in 1999, but most residents opted to keep them functioning, which indicated that despite their past association with an authoritarian regime the RT/RW did perform certain community functions that people found to be valuable. Elections for RT/RW leaders continued, and incumbents with backgrounds in the Golkar party did not necessarily fail to get reelected in the freer environment, but eventually supporters of different parties were elected, indicating the eventual democratization of these institutions. The new democratic government also realized the usefulness of these institutions in terms of administration and communication, which increasingly flowed from the bottom up as well as from top to bottom.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³Seah Chee Meow, "Parapolitical Institutions," in *Government and Politics of Singapore*, ed. Jon S.T. Quah, Chan Heng Chee, and Seah Chee Meow (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1985), 175-94; Ooi Giok Ling, "State Shaping of Community-level Politics," in *Local Organizations and Urban Governance in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Benjamin Read and Robert Pekkanen (New York: Routledge, 2009), 174-90.

¹⁰⁴Aiko Kurasawa, "Swaying between State and Community: The Role of RT/RW in Post-Suharto Indonesia," in *Local Organizations and Urban Governance in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Benjamin Read and Robert Pekkanen (New York: Routledge, 2009), 58-84.

In both Singapore and Suharto-era Indonesia, these grassroots political institutions are/were important components of an authoritarian political system that facilitates central control and surveillance over people and limits popular participation. Although Suharto's regime has collapsed while the Singapore polity has liberalized to a certain extent, both regimes would generally be considered models of successful authoritarianism, featuring order and economic development at the same time. The RC system in China performs similar roles for its authoritarian regime.

Conclusion

On August 26, 2010, the Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued a document entitled "Opinions on Strengthening and Improving the Work of Building Up Urban Community Residents' Committees."¹⁰⁵ This was the most important document on the subject since the MCA's 2000 document on the community construction policy, and it serves as the blueprint and policy guidance for RCs in the immediate future. The document reasserts the importance of the RC as a community organization and a link between residents and higher-level government bodies, but makes it clear that the RC must work under the leadership of the community party branch. It sets a target date of 2020, by which time all RCs in China should have a strengthened organizational system (健全組織體系) and have considerably increased the degree of organization of urban residents. By "strengthened organizational system" the document means the setting up of functional subcommittees and residents' small groups and the appointment of apartment block leaders under the direction of the RC. Homeowners' committees and other small community voluntary groups are all to be incorporated into the RC organization. The wide scope of the RC's work is once again emphasized in this document. One of

¹⁰⁵"Guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin shequ jumin weiyuanhui jianshe gongzuo de yijian," August 26, 2010, <http://zqs.mca.gov.cn/article/sqjs/zcwj/201011/20101100114014.shtml>.

the duties the RC is tasked with is the organization of community residents to participate in the comprehensive management of social safety (社會治安綜合治理), mass control and prevention work (群防群控), and the mediation of civil disputes, thus ensuring that the community is the foundation of a harmonious society.

The document urges both the public and private sectors to invest more resources in the work of the RCs in order to expand their activities and attract more qualified people to become RC officers. There is a strong focus in the document on increasing the professionalism and level of education of RC officers, and it calls for city governments to provide professional and ideological training for them. For the first time in an important official document, RC officers are viewed as possible recruits for other party and state posts such as deputies to the local people's congresses.

As for community democracy, the document asserts the need to guarantee residents' democratic rights and reform the electoral system, but states that election work has to be conducted under the leadership of the party organization. It says that elections should serve to recruit more able and more qualified people, and to this end nominees should be meticulously screened before becoming formal candidates. More participatory forms of decision making, such as the residents' assembly, consultative councils, and community dialogues and hearings are encouraged, while openness in RC affairs is to be institutionalized.

The essential ideas concerning the future development of the RC contained in this 2010 document thus affirm the analysis presented in this paper. Here, I have attempted to delineate the varied and complex nature of the residents' committee and its roles in China's political system. Both of these roles, that of grassroots democracy and that of stability maintenance, have become more important, and they are not mutually exclusive. Instead, in official discourse, they are interpreted as being mutually reinforcing. While it is becoming more democratic within the official framework, the RC continues to be an important tool of the regime and it has performed impressively when it was called upon by the party-state to deal with what were perceived by the leadership as life and death crises. Examination of similar organizations in other authoritarian settings suggests

that these local institutions are important sources of support for the regime. Even if the leaders of these local institutions are democratically elected and allowed some autonomy, the democratic influence they can potentially exert on the overall political structure is quite limited. Nevertheless, as the case of Indonesia illustrates, quasi-democratic as they are, such institutions may well survive into the postauthoritarian era and continue to be important channels of political participation. The limited nature of the democratic reform of the RCs does not mean that such reform is totally futile. The socialization and routinization effect of such democratic practices could well contribute to democratic consolidation in the long term.

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