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The Politics of Neighborhood Governance: Understanding China's State-Society Relations Through an Examination of the Residents Committee

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THE POLITICS OF NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNANCE: UNDERSTANDING
CHINA'S STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS THROUGH AN EXAMINATION
OF THE RESIDENTS COMMITTEE

by

Jianfeng Wang

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requirements for the
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Western Michigan University
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THE POLITICS OF NEIGHBORHOOD GOVERNANCE: UNDERSTANDING
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Jianfeng Wang, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2005

For the nearly three decades of coexistence between economic liberalization and political authoritarianism, China remains as an anomaly to the liberal mantra of our time. This project explores a segment of the China Paradox, the state-society interaction channeled by the Residents Committee. Being the largest urban neighborhood organization, the committee deserves study because of its controversial status interlaid between ordinary residents it claims to represent and the authoritarian state. The committee enters the discourse as a directly congruent example of the same paradox that the whole China displays, when it is endowed with important, yet tension-changed statutory functions ranging from social control to service provision and neighborhood self-governance. How, and under what conditions, does the committee carry out its functions? What can be learned about changing state-society relations from the dynamics of neighborhood politics in China?

This project draws its analytical framework on the theoretical models of state penetration, civil disobedience, corporatism, and synergy, as well as on the practices of American, Cuban, and Japanese neighborhood organizations and the Chinese rural Villagers Committee. The research is designed as a comparative study over four distinctive Residents Committees in Tianjin City. Being a fulltime fellow worker for

five months, I have accumulated in-depth information about the committees through daily observation, extensive interviews, and intensive documentation.

The four committees' functions are identified and explained primarily through their structural connections with the lowest state organ in cities, the street office, and residents (including other neighborhood organizations and activists). The study reveals multiple possibilities of Chinese social/political transformation. Among them emerges a promising trend of state-society cooperation, which is realigning and accommodating political authoritarianism and economic openness into a seemingly sustainable pattern of development at the urban grassroots. Referred to as an "amphibian" organization spanning public-private division, the committee highlights the limits of the state-society antithesis in the study of political transformation. The observed patterns of neighborhood politics also raise caution against the universal applicability of the liberal norm of civil society to countries like China with distinctive conditions from which the original norm is present and constructed.

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Introduction

China's Residents Committee

Linking the State with Ordinary Residents

Chapter One

Prologue

The Dejia Community does not appear to be strikingly different from hundreds and thousands of other urban communities in China. Roughly 4,500 residents live in this warm but clean and comfortable neighborhood, located in the heart of the metropolitan Tianjin City. Most of the adults rush out of the neighborhood for work at dawn, leaving this cluster of six-floored concrete-brick mixing apartment buildings quiet and even a little dreary. On the northwest side of the community sits a line of freestanding one-floored buildings. The organization occupying these buildings is the Dejia Residents Committee, which is for all intents and purposes in control of the community.

We have complained about this issue many times to the city and district leaders as well as the related governmental sections. No results! Therefore, being the representative of all Dejia residents, our committee is formally seeking help from you, the People's Congress of Tianjin City as the highest authority in our city. Please put our accusation into your propositions and discuss it in your coming annual meeting. We earnestly trust that you representatives will bring justice back to our community.

This is an excerpt from a letter sent by the committee to the People's Congress of Tianjin City on December 12, 2003. In the letter, the committee accused its back-fence neighbor, the No.1 Rest House of Tianjin City, of infringing upon the interests

of the committee. The No. 1 Rest House is a luxurious villa specially prepared for the most senior national and foreign leaders when they visit Tianjin City. The facility is a military forbidden zone. Local residents call it “the Camp David of Tianjin City.”

The dispute started in 2003 when the Rest House facility installed a huge boiler near the bounding wall that separates it from the Dejia Community. The boiler is located just 14 meters away from the four nearest Dejia residential buildings—numbers 65, 66, 67, and 68. The residents began complaining about the low frequency rumbling and the exhaust pollution emitted from the boiler immediately after it had been finished. They worried about not only the damage to their health, but also the devaluation of their private property as the result of the pollution. Some even called the boiler a “time bomb.” Representing its constituents, the committee attempted several times to negotiate with the facility. However, the facility manager never bothered talking with the committee. Indeed, the facility even prohibited the committee members from entering its compound to check the boiler in the name of security. That was not an uncommon result in China, since no one would question the facility’s authority and legitimacy over a no-ranking and unofficial residential organization.

However, what makes the story interesting is the persistence of the committee in its accusations. First, it asked help from the street office, but the office refused to back the committee. The reasons were simple. First, the administrative rank of the facility is much higher than the rank of the street office in the Chinese administrative hierarchy. More importantly, the facility is a security station, an “independent

kingdom” beyond the control of regular administration. The office believed that the fight with the facility was helpless, and tried persuading the committee to back down on this issue. It even warned the committee of the potential consequences for both residents and the committee if the dispute was scaled-up to higher levels of administration. The committee defied the warning, however, and went up to the district and, later, to the city government. After receiving similar rejections, the committee sued the facility but the district court refused to accept the case. Finally, the committee sent the letter to the People's Congress of Tianjin City for help, and then sent a similar letter to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference of Tianjin City two days later.

Eventually the committee's perseverance harvested some results. The Tianjin City Planning and Land Resource Bureau and the Environmental Protection Bureau of Hexi District Government together ruled that the boiler was a non-sanctioned illegal construction, and its emission exceeded the national environmental standard. Leaving aside the detail of how the irresponsible government sector was punished and residents were compensated, the committee's action itself raises some interesting questions about the nature of its organization and its interactions with the state and ordinary residents. What is the Residents Committee? How could it win a concession from a powerful piece of the state? How frequent are such concessions? What can we learn about grassroots state-society relations in contemporary China from the organization?

Residents Committee: A Chinese “Parallel Polis?”

The Dejia Residents Committee is only one of 1,115 Residents Committees in Tianjin City (*Tianjin Statistical Yearbook*, 2003). They together constitute the lowest-tiered but largest social network existing between the state and ordinary residents in the city. Each committee has between three and nine full time members, and they are often middle-aged or elderly women handpicked by local governments. A committee is usually in charge of a variety of issues that affect several thousand urban residents. According to the Chinese Constitution (1982), the committee is the only grassroots organization that is legally recognized within urban communities. It is supposed to be self-governing body that is elected by and is accountable to ordinary residents. The Constitution also guarantees it an independent legal status, protecting its operations from outside infringement by the state or other organizations.

The Dejia Residents Committee’s action against the No. 1 Rest House of Tianjin City followed its legal obligation precisely. It played the leading role by representing the best interests of its constituents. Such an activity is reminiscent of success stories from former East European communist countries where disobedient civil societies organized at the grassroots level, competed with, and eventually won over the penetrative states that governed over them.

Indeed, it is not hard to find some similarities between the Dejia Residents Committee and the initial stages of the Polish Solidarity movement. Both cases present observers with grassroots organizations that effectively organized and led their constituents to engage in a silent nonetheless resilient battle against the abusive

states. Even the fighting strategy that the committee adopted is close to the East European model; that is, by promoting legitimate opposition rather than vociferous confrontation when the state's power was asymmetrically stronger.

The committee's director, Ms. Li Lan, told me that she had stood firmly to a principle from the beginning: solving the dispute by appealing only to legal means. She believed that any non-peaceful resistance would do nothing but ruin the legitimacy of the committee's accusation. When the court refused to accept the case, Ms. Li tried hard persuading a few angry residents not to block the entrance of the facility, protest on the street or in the front of the city government building, and even go to Beijing to appeal. Her decision finally proved appropriate.

Given these similarities, does the Residents Committee represent a genuine transition at the grassroots level that someday in the future it might lead up to democratization of China? I.e., is the organization a potential "parallel polis," similar to those dissent organizations in Eastern European communist countries?

When this first story about the Deji Residents Committee is told, many would raise this Eastern European analogy as I did when I first read the documents. The analogy is alluring as we live in the age when "history" is supposed to end with the liberal mantra (Fukuyama, 1992). Dictatorship should be torn down according to the sentiment of the mantra, and democracy and liberty must prevail. Any activity like that described above as undertaken by an organization like the Deji Residents Committee should raise curiosity about the possibility of a bottom-up liberalization in the largest remaining communist country on this planet.

This liberal mantra, not surprisingly, has already had a significant ripple effect on the study of the state-society relations in China. Many China observers, inspired by the effective explanatory power of the liberal concept, and perhaps more encouraged by the triumph in East Europe, have attempted either to prove or discover the universal value of the mantra and its indicated path in Chinese context.

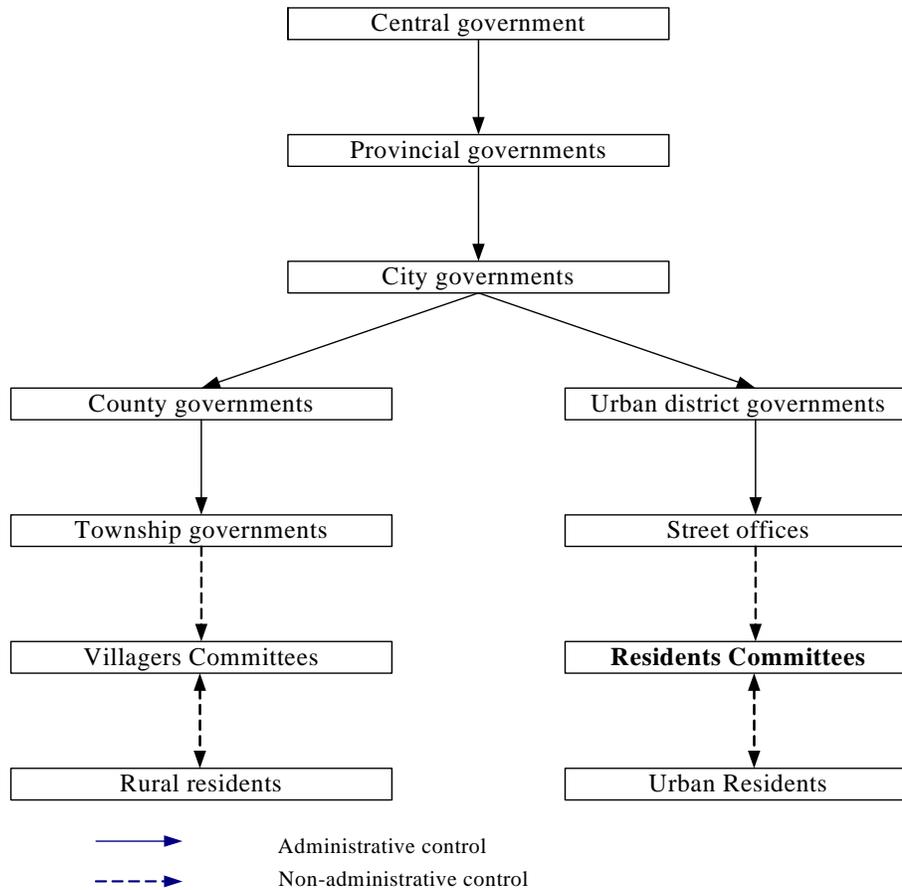
Typical examples of these sorts of effort can be found in studies of the Chinese rural institutional counterpart to the urban Residents Committee, the Villagers Committee. Figure 1-1 shows the great similarities between the two institutions. While the Villagers Committee serves as the link between peasants and the state in rural areas, the Residents Committee has essentially the same legal status in cities. Both institutions are defined in the Constitution as “grassroots mass self-governing organizations” with similar structures and statutory functions.

The Villagers Committee started attracting the interest of researchers in the late 1980s when the mechanism of direct election was adopted in some villages. Despite some serious reservations about the authenticity of the democratic elections in the Villagers Committees (Kennedy, 2002; O’Brien and Li, 2000), the literature enthusiastically suggests that the organization represents a genuine path to grassroots democracy and the eventual democratization of Chinese politics (Bai, 1997; Carter Center Delegation Report, 1997, 1998; Epstein, 1997; International Republican Institute, 1994, 1997; Oi and Rozelle, 2000; Pastor and Tan, 2000; Shi, 1999; Wang, 2001; Wang, 1997). The practice of the Villagers Committee at the rural grassroots is described as “a definite step forward in the nation’s delicate move toward a more

democratic government” (Institute for Rural Development, 1994, p. 1). As Wang (1997, p. 1440) argues, “The active participation of eight hundred million of Chinese peasants at every level of elections will become an irresistible force to reconstitute the state from below.” As a result, he continues, “the Chinese case shows that the democratic wave can flourish first in rural areas” (Wang, 1997, p. 1440).

The studies on the Villagers Committee identify it as an important self-governing entity for rural peasants to “shield themselves against the encroachments of local government and to protect their legal rights and properties” (Wang, 1997, p. 1440). Coordinately, the Deji Residents Committee was engaged in exactly this same sort of activity in the above-related story. If the Villagers Committee is the hope of democratization for rural China, what is about the Residents Committee for cities? Given the same legal nature between the two grassroots organizations, would it be possible that the Residents Committee follows its rural cousin in changing the political establishment from the below? Such an analogy is indeed not baseless if the broad context of Chinese economic reform is brought into picture.

Figure 1-1: The Formal Governing Structure in China¹



¹ There are four cities directly under the control of the central government. There are also few provinces that directly control their counties, such as Jiangsu Province.

Urban Crisis: Economic Reform and Governability

Lipset (1959) once empirically tested for a positive correlation between economic development and democracy. Ever since then, this correlation has been treated as a holy ordinance, even though it is sometimes labeled as being economic determinism and linearity (Burkhart and Lewis-Beck, 1994; Przeworski and Limongi, 1997). According to the theory, economic growth increases the desire and capability of people to participate in decision-making processes, which in turn facilitates democratization. This economic theory proposes at least three social and political changes as the result of economic development. First, ordinary people become more interested in influencing governmental decision-making process since economic growth increases state-individual interactions. Second, economic development alters the stratification of the population and creates a dominant middle class. Finally, increases in personal wealth change people's political orientations towards a more open system (Weiner, 1971; Nie and Prewitt, 1969).

This economic-political tandem relationship underlies many contemporary Chinese state-society studies, which suggests that economic reform will facilitate, if not cause, democracy to Chinese society sooner or later (White, 1993a). In fact, nearly all observers who praise the democratic progress in rural China have based their arguments on the fact of China's rapid economic development situation either explicitly or implicitly, regardless of their detail arguments. It is argued that crisis of rural governance, as a result of economic liberalization, has forced the state to accept democratization in rural villages (Shi, 1999). Now, if economic development created

a crisis that triggered democratic transition in rural China, as the liberal scholars believe, what is the situation in cities, where deeper crisis occurs as more profound economic reform measures are taken?

The *Danwei* System – The Traditional Urban Control Cornerstone

Cities once were safe boxes in China. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) imposed a Soviet-style planned system to manage the economy after it took power in 1949. The state monopolized all social resources, which made it possible to deeply penetrate urban society through direct control over not only production resources, but also living resources, such as food, employment, housing, social welfare, and education. In this totalitarian system, politics, economy, and social life were very much intertwined and the state became *the* axle that commanded essentially everything in the society. In order to match this centralized economic basis in cities, the CCP created a tightly controlled network, “the working unit system” [the *danwei* system] (Lu and Perry, 1997). Besides serving as the basic economic unit for the state-owned economy, the *danwei* was also the cornerstone for social and political control in cities. All *danwei* were subordinated to various levels of government, and urban residents were subordinated to various *danwei*. A *danwei* managed nearly all aspects of its employees’ lives (including their families) from the cradle to the grave. This was a system where urban society was deeply embedded into the state’s political will. If the society was a big “honeycomb,” as Shue (1988) characterized, each *danwei* formulated an independent and closed cell. Each individual was slotted into a small cell. He or she became a “*danwei* person” [*danwei ren*] rather than a “social

person” [*shehui ren*], when most of his or her needs depended upon his or her *danwei*. Therefore, the society was sliced into millions of largely isolated *danwei*. Each *danwei* existed under the shadow of the state, and each individual was a *danwei*’s dependent.

This system was a highly effective control system, and fit well into the Chinese planned economy. The state had successfully managed cities utilizing it until the Dengist economic reforms were adopted in the late 1970s.

Crisis of Urban Governance

Deng Xiaoping, the principal architect of Chinese economic reform, inherited a massive and sluggish state-owned economy on the brink of collapse when he took charge of China in 1978. He then initiated a fundamental reform in economic area: gradually transforming the planned economy into a market economy. Nearly three decades later, a few question the achievements of the Chinese economy. With nearly the highest growth rate in the world over the period, China has become the sixth largest economic entity in the world (the second if using purchasing parity value), and it has since been more or less fully integrated into the world economic system.

However, under the aureole of its rapid economic growth, the urban governing structure has been dragged down into an unprecedented crisis. The *danwei* system, upon which the state relied for social and political control, is rapidly dissolving as the effects of economic reform affect the Chinese social system and politics.

In line with the Dengist reforms, the state has gradually retreated from being involved with direct production activities. It pushes its formerly owned *danwei* to

face market competition. Since the market economy is built upon the profit-seeking motive, the *danwei* has had to peel off its non-economic responsibilities like providing housing, medical services, child schooling, and social security to its employees. As a result, the trinity of state-*danwei*-urban residents has been dissolved from both directions (Croll, 1999).

Economic reform has also created new types of working units that have little connection with the state. State-owned employees constituted only less than thirty percent of total urban employment in China in 2002 (Table 1-1).

Table 1-1: China Urban Employment Personnel (1999-2002)

(10,000 persons)

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Urban employed persons (Total)	22412	23151	23940	24780
State-owned units	8572	8102	7640	7163
Urban collective-owned units	1712	1499	1291	1122
Cooperative units	144	155	153	161
Joint ownership units	46	42	45	45
Limited liability corporations	603	687	841	1083
Share-holding corporations Ltd.	420	457	483	538
Private enterprises	1053	1268	1527	1999
Units with funds from Hong Kong, Macro, & Taiwan	306	310	326	367
Foreign funded units	306	332	345	391
Self-employed units	2414	2136	2131	2269

Source: *China Statistical Yearbook*, 2003.

That number has particular political significance from an historical perspective: just thirty years ago a vast majority of urban employees worked for state-owned units. More interestingly, the number of people working in private enterprises and so called limited liability corporations doubled in just four years between 1999 and 2002, which reflects the rapid pace of privatization in China.

Table 1-2 shows a more dynamic trend of employment composition in Tianjin City. In 1978, seventy-seven percent of employees worked in the state-owned system. Today, that number has dropped to forty-six percent.² In contrast, the number of employees in “other ownership” and “private and individual” sectors skyrocketed after 1993.³ Before that, they constituted a negligible part of the total work force in the city.

The national level data and the data in Tianjin City both suggest a simple fact: the majority of urban residents no longer directly rely upon the state for their living resources. Economic independence implies more personal freedom from the state. As the traditional *danwei* becomes no more than a purely economic entity, the state is losing its most powerful means of control over the urban society in the reform era. Even those who still work in state-owned units have much weaker ties with the state, since those remaining state-owned units, like their private competitors, are primarily concerned with making profit. Indeed, people often find that non-state sectors are more attractive, especially for young Chinese. For example, an average state-owned unit worker received only seventy-one percent of income that a foreign funded unit worker did in 2002 (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2003).

² The percentage of state-owned employees among total employees in Tianjin City is higher than the national level, because it was one of the selected cities in which the state had heavily invested during the pre-reform era.

³ 1993 is the year when China decided to recommitted to the economic reform process after the chilly stagnation after the 1989 student event. Since then, Chinese private economy has entered rapid track of growth.

Table 1-2: Tianjin City Urban Employment Personnel (1978-2002)

(10,000 persons)

	Total urban employment	State-Owned Employment	Collective-owned Employment	Other Ownership employment	Private and Individual employment
1978	217.5	168.3	49.1		0.1
1979	230.34	178.2	52.04		0.1
1980	243.59	188.08	54.61		0.9
1981	255	194.02	59.88		1.1
1982	262.02	198.91	61.61		1.5
1983	270.33	201.27	66.96		2.1
1984	276.39	201.29	71.42	0.98	2.7
1985	281.08	205.26	69.71	1.51	4.6
1986	284.5	209.97	68.47	1.76	4.3
1987	286.63	212.1	66.89	2.54	5.1
1988	286.64	213.99	64.33	3.04	5.28
1989	289.91	217.32	63.45	3.61	5.53
1990	290.01	217.26	62.55	4.5	5.7
1991	300.58	219.34	66.17	6.05	9.02
1992	303.7	212.73	72.39	8.85	9.73
1993	312.7	210.9	75.5	16.3	10
1994	318.6	206.5	71.4	24.4	16.3
1995	319.8	202.1	68.4	29.2	20.1
1996	317.1	199.1	62.8	31	24.2
1997	318.6	196.16	58.19	35.8	28.45
1998	312.65	183.49	53	41.58	34.58
1999	313.89	176.54	47.54	49.8	40.01
2000	296.61	163.84	40.58	55.37	36.82
2001	295.37	153.25	32.13	60.94	49.05
2002	295.71	137.81	26.6	82.54	48.76

Source: *Tianjin City Statistical Yearbook*, 2003.

The dissolution of the *danwei* system has been accompanied by demographic change, which aggravates the crisis in urban governance. Economic growth creates a huge demand for cheap wage labor, which in turn breaks down the traditional segregation between the urban and rural sectors. In order to control urban residents and peasants, peasants were largely prohibited from entering cities without the state's permission before the mid-1980s. However, nearly 110 million peasants have filed

into almost every corner of Chinese cities today (*People's Daily*, 2002).⁴ A nation wide survey conducted in 1997 shows that an average urban community contains about 115 officially registered temporary peasants. That does not include more unregistered “black” peasants (Liu and Lu, 1997, p. 194).⁵ Nowadays, more than one in ten urban residents are registered as peasants in the average Chinese city, and the number is even higher in major cities (Solinger, 1995, p. 128).

While this flood of “floating population” has made the Chinese economic take-off possible, it also has posed tremendous challenges to the state’s capacity for political control. The Chinese government and ordinary urban residents once referred to the members of this population as “*mangliu*,” vagrants who wander aimlessly, begging, stealing, gambling, and working in prostitution (Li and Hu, 1991, p. 22). In many ways, the members of this demographic are the most rebellious population in China since they are young but have almost no stable interest connection with the cities where they live. In Chinese history, the “floating population” has subverted many regimes, including the Nationalist Regime (1911-1949 in mainland China, fled to Taiwan later), and the CCP is acutely aware of this fact of history. To some extent, controlling the “floating population” along the economic liberalization has become the most urgent problem for urban social stability (Jiang and Lu, 1997).

Besides the dissolution of the *danwei* system and floating population, cities are also paying increasingly higher price for losing social justice and equality.

⁴ *People's Daily* is the official newspaper managed by the Propaganda Bureau of the CCP Central Committee.

⁵ A person living in cities without proper documents and permissions is considered illegal and he/she will be fined and deported by public security organs.

Mounting social problems are swelling in the reform era, such as unemployment (Muo, 2000), enlarging the marginal classes (Khan and Riskin, 1998; Solinger, 1996), crime (Tanner, 2004), moral decay (Bakken, 1999), and environmental deterioration (Economy, 2004). Just a few cases can illustrate the pace and intensity of these problems. For example, urban unemployment in Tianjin City multiplied by 38 times in just seven years from 1996 to 2002 (Table 1-3).

Table 1-3: Official Urban Unemployment Rate of Tianjin City (1996-2002)

Year	Urban unemployment rate (%)
1996	0.37
1997	1.57
1998	4.71
1999	7.02
2000	13.52
2001	14.05
2002	14.30

Source: calculated from Table 2-15 in *Tianjin City Statistical Year Book*, 2003.

The nationwide number of offense cases against public order accepted or investigated by public security organs jumped ninety percent and seventy-five percent respectively from 1995 to 2002 (Table 1-4 and Table 1-5).⁶ Perhaps there is no better word than ‘shocking’ to describe the severity of social problems in Chinese cities. These problems threaten not only the confidence of ordinary Chinese on the rightness of economic reform, but also the legitimacy of the regime day by day (He, 1993). For example, Tang finds that “dissatisfaction with the pace of economic change reached an historic and ultimately volatile high in 1989, and by 1999, dissatisfaction was even

⁶ One of the most rapid growing and largest type of public order offenses is “Violating Regulations on Management of Residence or Identity.” Those regulations target primarily on floating population. The violations show the scale of floating population.

higher, although the political situation was supposedly more stable” (Tang, 2001, p. 906)⁷

Table 1-4: Offense Cases Against Public Order Accepted by Public Security Organs (1995-2002)⁸

	Unit: Case							
<i>Number of Cases Accepted to Be Treated</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>
Total	3289760	3363636	3227669	3232113	3356083	4437417	5713934	6232350
Disturbing Work or Public Order	332120	381035	330886	300201	268747	272113	413042	544363
Gang Fighting or Picking Quarrels and Making Troubles	84588	86626	90233	99050	103178	135930	154016	147307
Acting Indecently Towards Women	63220	63808	53976	41294	34192	32341	33063	27468
Obstructing the Government Workers to Perform Their Duty	45999	48686	45998	45971	47640	50490	56163	51917
Violating Regulations on Management of Firearms	23070	55019	35461	26234	24734	26456	59729	19052
Violating Regulations on Management of Explosives	26883	33475	35114	34912	49304	62819	88614	71606
Beating Other Body	503283	511716	537455	568438	576712	837778	1053191	1135896
Robbing Other People of Their Valuables	729707	620202	515110	528818	517277	732633	915240	1001965
Defrauding, Snatching or Extorting and Racketeering Valuables	93471	89405	78257	86537	90494	117594	141194	150620
Making Stirs and Then Robbing Public or Private Valuables	5821	5525	4970	4859	4529	6048	6888	6007
Intentionally Damaging Public or Private Valuables	48737	50221	49779	53033	54492	82159	107066	117672
Forging and Fraudulently Selling Bills or Certificates	43318	41224	29700	26119	23075	18131	18205	16656
Disturbing Public Order	13061	11011	10945	9000	10134	17539	12826	11275
Prostitution or Going Whoring	186661	210724	210390	189972	216660	225693	242053	224976
Gambling	433831	441929	417784	365221	382272	413846	463218	446654
Violating Regulations on Management of Residence or Identity	197808	218338	217676	268537	306111	561719	759048	899068
Others	458182	494692	563935	583917	646532	844128	1190378	1359848

Sources: *Statistical Yearbook of China*, 1996-2003.

⁷ Tang (2001) also finds that, people considered themselves worse off in 1999 than they did in 1989 in two key areas, income and job opportunities.

⁸ The table does not include (1) criminal cases, and (2) the offense cases handled by non-public security organs, such as the Residents Committee.

Table 1-5: Offense Cases Against Public Order Investigated and Treated by Public Security Organs (1995-2002)

Unit: Case

<i>Number of Cases Investigated and Treated</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>
Total	2968220	3117623	3003799	2994282	3105940	3823011	4851600	5196998
Disturbing Work or Public Order	330462	378452	322084	298650	267119	264865	406813	534504
Gang Fighting or Picking Quarrels and Making Troubles	81581	83769	87341	95560	98808	121290	134246	126225
Acting Indecently Towards Women	62141	62881	53225	40613	33538	30791	30660	25335
Obstructing the Government Workers to Perform Their Duty	45394	48128	45515	45347	46909	48504	53381	49599
Violating Regulations on Management of Firearms	22730	54773	35271	26047	24434	26081	58353	18699
Violating Regulations on Management of Explosives	26213	33305	34857	34473	48832	61410	86410	70496
Beating Other Body	476254	486295	509924	534990	536009	695294	829360	881592
Robbing Other People of Their Valuables	468437	430375	353804	357360	351066	399436	476997	470116
Defrauding, Snatching or Extorting and Racketeering Valuables	86589	83089	72385	78943	79449	87948	93956	84496
Making Stirs and Then Robbing Public or Private Valuables	5554	5296	4794	4715	4254	5320	5542	4582
Intentionally Damaging Public or Private Valuables	46670	48377	48081	50513	51465	66250	78898	84051
Forging and Fraudulently Selling Bills or Certificates	43162	41165	29428	26017	22863	17911	17872	16154
Disturbing Public Order	12982	10937	10890	8910	10001	16765	12245	10688
Prostitution or Going Whoring	185441	209652	209244	189452	215128	222132	239461	221930
Gambling	431453	439928	415991	363737	379039	402588	455727	438295
Violating Regulations on Management of Residence or Identity	197060	217380	216358	267877	305002	557131	749540	889793
Others	446097	483821	554607	571078	632024	799295	1122139	1270443

Sources: *Statistical Yearbook of China*, 1996-2003.

The Lumpy State

Economic reform brings unprecedented challenges to urban China. However, the state is far from ready to cope with them. The old control network, the *danwei* system, is fading quickly. The state has to find new ways to manage more economically and socially liberalized residents, a massive floating population, and other explosive social problems.

The state's first instinctive response is to enhance its local bureaucracy to fill the power vacuums created by economic development. That is why we see a

paradoxical fact in Chinese administrative reform. In one way, the state promised to drastically reduce its size by cutting its involvement in direct economic activities. Ironically however, the size of bureaucracy nearly doubled in the reform era (Tang, 2003). Most of the new positions were added at the local government level. For example, the Pudong Street Office, the lowest administrative unit above the earlier-mentioned Dejia Residents Committee, saw its official personnel expand from seven employees in the 1970s to roughly two hundred today. This does not include another three hundred temporary employees that also work for the office. A simple calculation illustrates how the expansion in the number of local officials has become a huge burden on the state's fiscal resources.⁹

To make things worse, China has entered a period of rapid urbanization. The Chinese urban population increased from 172 million in 1978 to 481 million in 2001 while the number of urban districts nearly doubled from 467 to 830 (*China Statistical Yearbooks*, various years). It is predicted that the urban population would reach 630 million by 2010, which means more peasants moving into cities, more numbers of cities, and larger size of cities (Qin, 1998, p. 16). All of these changes will further stretch the already tight government budget. Relying on additional bureaucratic expansion to manage cities is just fiscally unsustainable.

In addition, the swelled local governments have become increasingly inefficient in the handling of diverse and complex issues in city management, largely

⁹ Tianjin City has 99 street offices by 2002. If each street office has 200 employees at 2500 *yuan* per month salary level, the payroll only would be nearly 600 million *yuan*, 3.4 percent of total revenue (17.1 billion *yuan* in 2002) of the whole city. If we include the operating costs and the costs of their temporary employees, that percentage would be much higher. Data from *Tianjin City Statistical Yearbook* 2003.

due to the hierarchical nature of the bureaucracy (Xu and Cheng, 2002, p. 18). The excessive expansion of local bureaucracy has become a seedbed for corruption. There is a vast amount of literature describing the power-related corruption in the reform era (Cai, 2003; Gong, 2002; Guo and Hu, 2004). Even the former General Secretary of the CCP, Jiang Zemin, has publicly admitted in the 15th National Congress in 1997 that bureaucratic corruption is rampant and still growing bigger (*People's Daily* [Overseas edition], 1997b). Jiang has also publicly warned the CCP that bureaucratic and cadre corruption is the number one issue that threatens the ruling status of the CCP as it continues (Ma, 1999). Among all the different manifestations of bureaucratic corruption, local bureaucrats were responsible for most of them. Since these crooked officials are close to ordinary citizens, their bad behavior evokes a lot of social resentment, which is then in turn transferred onto the regime itself. In fact, the CCP had to discipline a large number of its corrupt cadres, of whom more than twenty thousand served at urban district and street office level, over sixteen hundred at the city level, and only seventy-eight at the provincial or ministerial level during the period from October 1992 to June 1997 (*People's Daily* [Overseas edition], 1997a).

Such a wide range of corruption at the local government level confirms Deng Xiaoping's worry about the alienation of bureaucratic power and disconnection from ordinary people. For Deng, the expansion of local governments was not a solution but

the ultimate root cause of the problems of bureaucratism and corruption (Deng, 1994).¹⁰

Residents Committee Called On

Chinese cities are facing a crisis of governability, and it is clear the lumpy bureaucracy in cities is not capable of handling these daunting challenges. If local governments are not the solution, what else can the state do?

Similarly to what it had done in the countryside, the state soon identified the Residents Committee as the key organization that could replace the *danwei* system in cities. Jiang Zemin believed that urban community development (including the Residents Committee) is “a critically important aspect of the overall mission of sustaining the Party’s principles, handling the problems of the masses, and solidifying a micro-basis of the governance” (*People’s Daily*, 1999). The then Premier Li Peng pointed out that the Residents Committee “is taking on greater and greater roles in social life and community construction. As the reform deepens, the function of the Residents Committee is changed and more and more jobs will fall on its shoulders” (*People’s Daily*, 2000b). The current President Hu Jintao also publicly advocated strengthening the Residents Committee once he admitted the ruling basis of the CCP was at risk in cities.

The grassroots is the ground of all our work. We must maintain the control over the grassroots and solidify the basis. ... Over the years, our attention on the grassroots is the countryside and the state-owned enterprises. Now according to the changing situation, besides continuing the above work, we must prioritize the urban community construction. This is a work with not

¹⁰ Deng’s (1994) very candid discussion about the problems resulting from the bureaucratism and over-centralization of power is in that article.

only great social and economic meanings, but also critical political meanings (*People's Daily*, 2000a).

It has been rare for the highest leadership in China to talk about urban organizational problems in such a prominent way, which indicates the fact that there have been important policy changes regarding the Residents Committee. The crisis of governability indicates the necessity of changing state-society relations in cities, and it seems that the Residents Committee is going to be a key element of any solution. Like reform in rural villages, reform in cities can be characterized as decentralization from the state. Deng Xiaoping once argued that the only solution that can increase the efficiency of governance and curb bureaucratism and corruption is to decentralize power to the hands of ordinary people (Deng, 1994, p. 328). The core of his argument involves reforming the structure of totalitarian control so as to encourage a counterbalance between the grassroots and corruptive and inefficient bureaucrats, although it must be stated that Deng certainly did not see liberal democracy as the objective of reform. However, loosening control over society has often been believed to be an important step toward the emergence of a dissenting civil society in Eastern European communist studies (Lewin, 1998; Weigle and Butterfield, 1992). This view is echoed by Chinese state-society scholars when they see the state's retreat from its economic function as an opportunity for civil society to emerge in China (White, 1993b).

In rural areas, it is the crisis of governability that has forced the state to empower the Villagers Committee, which in turn has set grassroots democratization on track (Shi, 1999; Wang, 1997). Nowadays while facing even bigger crises in cities,

the state has adopted a similar strategy: decentralizing its power to society, including the Residents Committee. If the Villagers Committee has championed and exemplified the cause of rural democratization in rural China, what will be the role of the Residents Committee in its cities? Will it epitomize a similar transformation as the literature has portrayed the Villagers Committee as doing? Referring to the broad picture of the liberal mantra, is the Residents Committee a key element of a genuine civil society, and thus is it the antithesis of the communist state? The story of the Deji Residents Committee offers a promising perspective in leading an effort against the abuses of the state. However, that story is only one aspect of the committee's relations with the state and its residential constituents. I found something in its archives that shows a dramatically different picture of how it connects with the state and residents.

Another Facet: The Residents Committee in the Literature

The Spring Festival is coming. We must tighten our neighborhood security in four areas. First, we must pay attention to monitoring, educating, and assisting the sensitive persons inside our neighborhood, especially released convicts. We need man-to-man monitoring: men visiting their homes, talking to them, and reporting on their unstable thought and behavior; second, we need to keep on monitoring and correcting *Falun Gong* practitioners;¹¹ third, we need to know fairly well the situation of special groups in our neighborhood; and finally, we must be careful of those outsiders who live in our neighborhood and of other floating populations. They are planning to return home as the Spring Festival comes, and we must be careful to take every precaution and try to monitor their activities.

This quote comes from the dossier of the comprehensive neighborhood security meeting convened by the Deji Residents Committee on January 11, 2002. The Spring Festival for Chinese is like Christmas for Americans. When every Deji resident is geared up for the holiday preparation, the committee also keeps itself busy. Community security is no doubt its priority, although its plan cited in the dossier is not necessarily consistent with the priority of the safety of the residents. The monitoring of residents with criminal records, neighborhood outsiders, or of those practicing outlawed religion may make the committee suspicious and somewhat untrustworthy in the eyes of the residents it represents. However, these security measures are certainly cheered on by the state.

Some of these security measures were primarily the initiatives of the street office, but were carried out by the committee. The committee convenes such a security meeting every month, a meeting that includes all of the committee members,

¹¹ The *Falun Gong* is accused as an evil cult spreading superstition and malicious fallacies to deceive people, according to the government ruling. It was cracked down soon after thousands of its believers surrounded the National Administrative Council building, something like the American White House, in 1999. Since then, practicing *Falun Gong* is outlawed in China (For more discussion on *Falun Gong*, see Danny Schechter (ed.), 2000).

neighborhood activists, and sometimes the ward police and a few resident representatives. One major goal in the meeting is to keep all kinds of “unstable elements” under control.

Neighborhood control is hardly a new challenge for many states. Due to either the resource limits or the intricate but often trivial nature of neighborhood affairs, many states rely on neighborhood organizations to mobilize and control the mass population at the grassroots level. However, the purposes and means of social control vary from state to state. Perhaps a few could disagree that the security measures undertaken by the Deji Residents Committee have gone far beyond the utmost a resident could bear in Western societies. It reminds us of a well-recognized neighborhood organization, the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) in Cuba.

Fidel Castro created the CDR in 1960 “as a system to mobilize and reeducate citizens, to publicize official goals and activities, to counter internal and external campaigns of aggression, and to promote and organize cooperatives, civil defense, and first-aid projects” (Bunck, 1994, p. 9). As an element of repression, the CDR was primarily a coercive organization aiming at revolutionary transformation, social control, and political mobilization (Dominguez, 1978, p. 208).

The security measures adopted by the Deji Residents Committee could be associated with what the CDR is doing in Cuba: both help the state extend its tentacles into the deepest levels of society through peer pressure and neighborhood surveillance. In looking at the Spring Festival security plan, one can easily see a

social control network in the Deji Community organized around the committee. The committee first takes control orders from the street office and then eventually implements them inside the community upon the targeted population. Such a penetrative scenario is consistent not only with the conventional image of China and its “communist” style of practicing politics, but also with the available literature on the Residents Committee.

Literature on the Residents Committee

There are a few studies that exist on the Residents Committee, and most of them date back to pre-reform era (Cohen, 1968; Lieberthal, 1980; Salaff, 1971; Schurmann, 1968; Townsend, 1967; Vogel, 1971; White, 1971) and the very early reform period (Benewick, 1991; Clark, 1989; Li and Bachman, 1989; Jankowiak, 1993; Whyte and Parish, 1984; Wu, 2002). Among the available information in the literature, the committee is portrayed mainly as a social control organization, like the Cuban CDR. Although its functions in social relief, neighborhood sanitation, and other non-coercive areas were skimmed through here and there, overall the literature treats the committee as only significant because it is the coercive state’s little myrmidon. Whyte and Parish (1984, p. 244) find that the committee plays key roles in trying to supervise things through the leadership of the street office and the street police station. Most of the security measures taken by the Deji Residents Committee today have their historical roots in the pre-reform China.

The Residents Committee officers, and the security officer in particular, devote a great deal of attention to keeping track of various kinds of suspect individuals and families in the neighborhood – individuals under ‘mass supervision,’ released convicts, people with bad class backgrounds or political

histories, or simply those suspected of engaging in illicit activities. At times, some of these 'negative elements' have had to regularly report on their activities and attitudes and even to perform menial labor around the neighborhood. ... Generally during times of disorder or on national holidays or during the visits of important foreign dignitaries, it is common to have residents organized to stand guard and patrol and to order certain suspect individuals in the neighborhoods to stay at home (Whyte and Parish, 1984, pp. 244-245).

Besides specifying how the Residents Committee carried out the social control function, the literature is also very helpful in establishing a historical basis for understanding why it was established.

In the pre-reform era, the state dominated cities through the *danwei* system. However, the *danwei* system had cracks: there were urban residents who could not be absorbed into the controlling purview of any *danwei*, such as the unemployed, housewives, and the disabled. In order to fill in the cracks and to bring the above-mentioned urban dwellers into the *danwei*, the Residents Committee was established since the 1950s (Salaff, 1971). In his report to the CCP Central Committee, Peng Zhen, a prominent senior leader responsible for public security and legal affairs, wrote:

Since we are at the beginning of our industrialization and we are still in transitional period to socialism, there are many street residents who do not belong to factory, firm, school, and administration in even relatively industrialized cities. These people even constitute sixty percent of total population in some cities. In order to organize and gradually transform them into *danwei*, and to reduce the burdens of district governments and dispatch public security units, we suggest establishing Residents Committees, besides street offices (Peng, 1991, p. 241).

Since the Residents Committee had existed primarily for the purpose of filling the cracks of the *danwei* system, its role in social control was not conspicuous,

compared with the high-profile roles of the more coercive and influential social control organizations, such as military, political party, public security agencies, and the *danwei* in the pre-reform era. That is probably the key reason that the committee in the pre-reform era was barely studied, as it showed no difference from other more salient social control organs.

Despite its negligibility, the literature shows that the committee created a grassroots state-resident relationship that was consistent with what the CDR in Cuba did: it created a top-down dynamic of state penetration into the cracks of society. Such a scenario is understandable as there was no way for the committee to behave differently in a totalitarian system like the pre-reform China (Tsou, 1986).¹²

If the security plan of the Deji Residents Committee fits into the state penetration literature that is derived primarily from the pre-reform era, the challenge for the literature is to reevaluate the organization under a very different state-resident context after nearly three decades of profound economic and social changes. As Chapter Two will show, the Residents Committee has emerged from being a marginal player to being *the* most important “middleman” between the state and ordinary residents in urban communities today. The state has recognized its critical position and, therefore, is actively promoting changes in the organization.

In the light of this important policy change, a few studies have yet begun to address this increasingly important organization. One example, however, of a study

¹² Some scholars, such as Shue (1988), argue against the concept of “totalitarianism.” However, even Shue (1988, p. 17) agrees that most of delays, distortions, and deflections of state’s intention came from local governments rather than civil society. In the pre-reform era, it was no space for institutions that were truly independent from the state’s will. Judging from the conditions of civil society, “totalitarianism” is appropriate to characterize the state’s power and authority in that era.

that has begun to unpack the committee in light of recent political changes is the study by Benjamin Read. He finds that the committee plays various important roles in assisting its residents in some communities, despite its consistent emphasis on facilitating administration and policing.

It is indeed true that the RCs [Residents Committees] intrude far less into ordinary people's lives than they once did, and also that there are significant obstacles that hinder them from blossoming into models of town-hall democracy (Read, 2000, pp. 806-807).

Read also focuses on the committee's attempt to cultivate interpersonal ties with residents, a pattern called "Administrative Grass-roots Engagement," and why it could win cooperation or face resistance from residents (Read, 2003). His researches clearly articulate a new facet in contrast to the otherwise consistent image of an unkind and even coercive committee in the usual literature.

State and Ordinary Residents: A Dilemma for the Residents Committee

The Deji Residents Committee illustrates some very interesting possibilities of transformation: it could on the one hand become a defiant civil organization which leads residents to fight against the abusive state as in the first story; or conversely it could continue on in its pre-reform role as a power chain that transfers the state's control down to ordinary individuals as in the second story. Is the Resident's Committee a potential challenger to the authoritarian state or a Chinese version of Cuban CDR? The answers to this question become particularly interesting when the broad paradox in contemporary China is considered.

Residents Committee and the China Paradox

China is experiencing an economic revolution: it has been replacing its formerly planned economy with a market economy, it has joined the World Trade Organization, and it has been promoting an open and competitive economy. While it took America almost fifty years to double per capita incomes after 1840 and took Japan thirty-three years to repeat that performance after 1880, China succeeded in doubling her per capita incomes in only ten years after 1978 (Rohwer, 1997, p. 116). The economic volume of China is twenty-eight times bigger in 2002 than it was in 1977 (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2003). In contrast to her rapid commercialization, however, China still remains the largest communist state in the world.

The coexistence of rapid economic liberalization and a one-party system for such a long period of time puzzles the world. The dominant trend worldwide tends to suggest that the market economy, which is prevailing throughout China, induces

political democratization. This trend was supported when democratic transitions occurred in several formerly authoritarian regimes after they actively promoted economic growth, as in Spain, South Korea, Turkey, Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. The collapse of the former Soviet Union and its East European satellites further endorses this theory from the opposite direction: the planned economy seems to have sold itself as a dead-end, which inevitably leads to the demise of the communist political system. Based on this logic, communist China would soon become history either due to the stagnation of its planned economic system or to the economic and social liberation it initiated in its market-oriented reforms. The first scenario is partially right as the CCP abandoned the dogma of Marxist economic planning and adopted the principle of the market and free competition. However, the second scenario still remains a theoretical hypothesis at best. The CCP has successfully promoted longer economic expansion than most authoritarian countries; meanwhile, it maintains relatively stable control of the political area.¹³ The continuously growing economy under the CCP's political monopoly poses an interesting paradox for the dominant liberal mantra to explain.

“When will China collapse?” The question has been raised repeatedly in the Western world since China initiated economic reform in the late 1970s. However, there is no persuasive evidence to suggest that the day will ever come. On the contrary, the average Chinese citizen increasingly favors political conservatism,

¹³ For example, a survey over urban residents in six major Chinese cities asked their favorite economic and political models, 76 percent thought that China should learn from the US economic model, but only 21 percent agreed with the US political model (for details, see Tang, 2001, p. 902).

supporting the one party system and a rising sense of nationalism (Tang, 2001). In addition, the Chinese model has gradually influenced some developing countries from Africa to Asia, including the remaining communist countries like Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea. Even Russia is recovering from its fever for democracy, and sees in its own potential future convergences with what China is doing now. The experience of China so far cannot be easily incorporated into the prevailing intellectual discourse, however. As China keeps on growing, its paradox is becoming a very interesting and important phenomenon to observe in world politics.

The Dejia Residents Committee is only a tiny piece of the gigantic China puzzle, but it can enter the discourse as a directly congruent example of the same paradox that the whole of China is experiencing at present. If the economic reforms force the Chinese state to strike a delicate balance between its authoritarian control and the increasingly stratified society, that balancing endeavor has to be absorbed into any intermediate organization, like the Dejia Residents Committee, as it intensively interacts with both the authoritarian state and ordinary citizens simultaneously.

As the two stories of this chapter indicate, the Dejia Residents Committee clearly feels pressure from both sides. In one way, it was under its residents' pressure to run after the abusive government. As their representative, it responded to its constituents' concerns and fought for the best interest of the community on the environmental issue, despite the political superiority of its opponent and the "well-meaning advice" emanating from the street office. Conversely, the security measures it took indicates the heavy influence it received from the street office to address the

concerns of the state. The Deji Residents Committee exists like the insides of a sandwich, laid between the street office and the residents. It faces a dilemma: it has to be accountable to its residents and simultaneously responsive to the state. It is obviously not a simple penetrative organization of the state anymore, since it also fights hard against the state's infringement upon the interests of its constituents. However, to call it "a parallel polis" as this term was used in the Eastern European communist politics is similarly debatable, since it retains means of social control rooted in the pre-reform China.

Research Questions

One can trace the root of the dilemma the Deji Residents Committee is facing to the tension between the authoritarian state and a stratified society. It is also the core question in the China Paradox. To a large degree, this is easy to anticipate. The activities in a Residents Committee should, after all, inevitably reflect the overall paradoxical state-society situation in contemporary China. If the Deji Residents Committee only reflected the interests of its residents or the state, it would not be such an interesting organization. The challenge for the committee is to take care of both, and more interestingly, to connect them together.

How does the Deji Residents Committee interact with both the state and the residents? Why does it listen to the state in one instance, but defy it on other occasions to fight for residents' interests? Intermediated between the state and residents, how is it able to achieve success one way or another? These are interesting

questions reflecting not only upon the controversial status of the Residents Committee, but also on overall state-society relations in China.

Of course, the above two stories only represent a small fraction of the daily responsibilities of the Deji Residents Committee. There is much more to be explored in attempting to figure out how it interacts with both the state and ordinary residents. For any organization that manages several thousand urban residents must be politically and socially important, and, therefore, worthy of being explored, and this is to say nothing of the fact that the total number of Residents Committees in China exceeds 115,000 (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2003). The sheer quantity of them and the salience of China as a case study in world politics also imply their importance as objects of study. More importantly, there is no other organization that is so closely connected with the hundreds of millions of urban Chinese residents, and yet, also fundamentally crucial for the imperatives of the authoritarian state. Therefore, the research question in this project is this: How does the Residents Committee interact with the state and ordinary residents in contemporary China? More specifically, the project attempts to address three sets of interrelated questions:

1. Being interlaid between the state and ordinary residents, how does the committee carry out its three statutory functions in urban communities?¹⁴
2. What account for functional similarities and differences across the different committees?

¹⁴ The three statutory functions are: service provision, neighborhood self-governance, and social control. They will be discussed in the next chapter in details.

3. Consequently, what can we learn about state-society interactions at the urban grassroots level? How does this study contribute to the analytical frameworks in which Chinese state-society relations are debated? To what extent can Western-originated prescriptive languages be transplanted to Chinese politics?

Project Preview

Analytical Framework

The Residents Committee is an underestimated grassroots organization in Chinese state-society studies. The available literature offers a useful but incomplete understanding about it in the reform era. In order to have a comparatively meaningful analysis, my analytical framework needs to go beyond the limited focus of the literature on the Residents Committee. However, the available literature should be the starting point. It contributes to the first model I can use to conceptualize the Residents Committee: the penetrative model. As the literature suggests, a penetrative Residents Committee, like the Cuban CDR, would behave as merely a tool of the state for the purpose of control over ordinary residents in its neighborhood. This model is used regularly to describe the relationship between state and social organizations in the pre-reform China as well as other totalitarian systems.

In contrast, the literature on former communist countries in Eastern Europe suggests an opposite model: the civil disobedience model. It is based upon the prevailing liberal understanding of state-society relations, particularly as regards the transition of the repressive regimes into ones more exemplary of liberal ideas. It will emphasize a Polish Solidarity style of a self-governing organization, which could and would be a key element of urban incipient democracy in contemporary China.

The third model, the corporatist model, is borrowed from the literature of state corporatism. It would not treat the Residents Committee as only a flunky of the penetrative state in a closed society, as the penetrative model did. Instead, it focuses

on the elite complicity at the neighborhood level. The state and the local elite bolster each other for mutual interests, but largely at the costs of ordinary residents.

The last is a synergistic model. It concentrates on how the state and grassroots organizations (or individual citizens) foster structural arrangements and reciprocal interactions so that a cooperative and constructive connection is created for the sake of grassroots development. It is possible that both the state's capacity and residents' interests are enhanced under the synergy, at least in the short term. The synergistic model is not as neatly cut as the other three models; however, it offers something different that cannot be easily incorporated into any of the three models.

The four models together construct different prototypes of the Residents Committee, and their viability is tested when the actual functions of the committee are explored. This project approaches the committee from its statutory functions. The Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees has designated three functions to the committee: social control, service provision, and neighborhood self-governance. Each function can be further specified into multiple tasks. As the two stories of the Deji Residents Committee show, the committee's functions reflect its distinctive relations with the state and ordinary residents. Therefore, by closely examining how the three statutory functions are carried out, the explanatory capacity of the four models could be tested and the overall state-society relations intermediated through the committee could be interpreted.

Research Methods

Four Residents Committees are chosen from Tianjin City for a comparative case study. Each has its unique features. The Jingtai Residents Committee was established in 2002 in the Jingtai Community. The community is affluent and privately owned, with modern high-rise buildings and a beautiful environment in the downtown Tianjin City. The Huashan Residents Committee is located on the outskirts of the city. The committee, which was created in the early 1980s, is besieged by all kinds of problems as the result of deindustrialization. The whole region is depleted as its major industries, textile and bicycle, are bankrupt.

The other two committees, the Dejia and Shiyan Residents Committees, have many similarities. Both are located on the same street in the middle of the city. They were both established in the 1950s and reorganized in the late 1980s. In addition, they are facing roughly the same composition of middle-class residents. However, at least one thing differentiates them: the Shiyan Residents Committee spearheaded the first direct election in Tianjin City in 2003. The direct election in and of itself is worthy of study.

I spent five months in those committees collecting information. Multiple methods were employed to access the selected communities. I talked to committee members, neighborhood activists, ordinary residents, and governmental officials. I also spent much of my time as a volunteer working together with the committees I observed. Intensive document review was my daily job, and I was amazed by the quality of the archives these committees stocked.

Project Structure

This project proceeds along four sections. The first section lays the foundation for the project. The section starts with the analytical framework, with a focus on the relationship between the four ideal models and the Residents Committee's three statutory functions. A brief comparison among neighborhood organizations in the United States, Cuba, Japan, and the Chinese Villagers Committee adds an international perspective on how state and society are connected differently at the grassroots level. I also discuss the historical evolution of the Residents Committee within the broad political context of China.

The methodological section discusses the case selection, access methods to the field, data collection methods, and the measures taken to protect informants.

The next section delineates the three statutory functions of the Residents Committee. The discussion is organized between the four committees. In each case, the ways that each committee carries out its statutory functions is explored and compared with other committees. At the end of the section the readers should be clear about the similarities and differences between the four committees.

The last section explains the patterns observed in the four committees. I focus on a set of structural factors, mainly each committee's historical endowment, personal factors, and structural relations with the state and local residents. This study finds that the functional differences between the committees are primarily results of those structural relations. A comparison of the functional differences and their underlying

structural relations together draws a vivid picture about grassroots state-society interactions channeled through the committee.

Findings

This study finds that the four Residents Committees play very different roles in their communities. None of the four ideal models can fully explain such a diverse, multi-faceted, and paradoxical organization. However, there is a discernable dynamic on the horizon, despite its variation from community to community. Interlaid squarely between the authoritarian state and ordinary residents in the rapidly changing society, the committee is experiencing a silent, nonetheless fundamental transformation: from a typical social control machine to an increasingly balanced ‘sandwich’ organization which formulates and withholds the interests of reciprocal community networks, although sometimes the networks are tension-charged.

In addition, the state-committee relationship is experiencing significant adjustments. The influence of the state on the committee is still profound and dominant in many cases. However, an adaptive, flexible, and cooperative state-committee relationship is gradually replacing the traditionally rigid and total control of the state. It is the result of both the committee’s structural changes and the state’s self-reform effort. The other side of the equation sees gradual but steady expansion of neighborhood self-governance through the operation of the committee. Many new mechanisms have been developed to increase the accountability of the committee as well as local officials to the interests of ordinary residents. However, the transformation of the committee does not show promising signs as far as becoming a

‘dissenting’ entity as the liberal mantra predicts. On the contrary, the operations of the committee sometimes have solidified the ruling basis as well as the legitimacy of the political system, at least in the short run.

The Residents Committee’s transformation reveals some important changes between the state and society in urban communities. The interactions between the state and residents are becoming increasingly institutionalized and stabilized as both are involved in an emerging cooperative community network around the committee. Indeed, the state and residents can often identify more common interests than differences at the community level, which makes community cooperation feasible. However, the tension between them is real and sometimes even out of control, which underscores the difficulty and uncertainty of grassroots structural adjustment in the authoritarian system.

The state, embodied primarily in the street office, presents a mixed picture. It is fair to say that the authoritarian state is still a major source of problems for the transformation of the Residents Committee. The state will not cease its effort to maintain certain levels of influence on the committee, as it recognizes the increasingly critical status of the committee in urban management. However, the state also sees the effort towards self-constraint, flexibility, and willingness to cooperate with the committee and residents, and more than often such effort is self-motivated. To a large extent, it is the state, particularly local governments, which originates and buttresses the innovations that have occurred in the committee and its community. Similarly to the economic reform, the reform at urban grassroots governance is a

state-led series of developments, characterized by a gradual process of decentralization.

Meanwhile, the urban neighborhoods are increasingly stratified in the reform era. Community civic groups have emerged and are actively involved in diverse neighborhood activities. However, one could hardly raise the hope of a burgeoning civil society in those groups, since they play a subordinate role compared to the state's influence and the Residents Committee in urban communities. Rather than being in non-conformity or even opposition to the authoritarian state, these groups are quite 'tame' and supportive of the current political arrangements.

This project also finds that a state-civil society dichotomy cannot accurately communicate the true dynamics found in urban communities. The dichotomy tends to pitch society against the authoritarian state. If it followed the dictated discourse over the happenings in contemporary China, our inquiry would easily miss those changes occurring outside of the dichotomous scheme but that are nonetheless fundamental and politically significant. As the project will show, the changes, which centered around what I call "amphibian organizations" like the Residents Committee, are crystallized into a trichotomous community network: the state, the committee, and residents (community civic groups). While the future of the trichotomy faces uncertainties, it is imperative to acknowledge that such a network is catching up with the broad social and political changes in the current Chinese political context. The project also illuminates the deficiencies of the prevailing liberal mantra in the discourse of Chinese state-society relations, and calls for indigenous frameworks in

which the development of those countries whose characteristic is distinct from the traditional Western models can be empirically studied from within, rather than prescriptively “discovered” from outside.

Contextual Ground for the Residents Committee

Chapter Two

Prologue

Jan 4, 8:10 am, Shiyuan #9, two adults fighting, report to police station.

Jan 4, 9:35 am, Shiyuan #1, a madman screaming in the stairway, Wang Lijuan reach the spot and banish him.

Jan 4, 1:05 pm, Shiyuan #26, cracks in the coping, contact housing management station.

Jan 4, 2:40 pm, Shiyuan #31, Room 101, ground water outflow, contact waterworks and help drain.

Jan 4, 3:10 pm, Shiyuan #21, Room 101, toilet unusable due to the outside sewer clog, contact pumping station and clear the sewer pipe.

Jan 5, 9:27 am, Shiyuan #6, Room 602, Granny Li feels heart attack and calls for help, Huo Jianmin and Zhang Liping contact and help send her to community medical station.

Jan 5, 2: 34 pm, Shiyuan #6, Room 201, Ms. Zheng complains local police station not returning her son's household registration card, call police station and card returned.

Jan 5, 2: 52 pm, Shiyuan #68, reporting suspicious new house-renters, report to police station.

Jan 5, 3: 36 pm, Shiyuan 32, Room 302, Mr. Jia reports overcharge of his electricity bill, contact Chengnan Power Supply Bureau (find no overcharge).

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...

This is a short excerpt from the thick book of the 2004 Sunshine Community Hotline Register. The Shiyuan Residents Committee opened this hotline to provide timely services to its residents under the newly elected committee leadership in June 2003. The hotline has quickly become really “hot.” Indeed, there were seventy-nine calls in January 2004 alone, roughly three per working day. One committee member, Grandpa Liu Jingyu, told me that the popularity of this hotline exceeded the committee’s original expectations. He and other committee members were delighted

about the success of this innovation. “The hotline is now a powerful means for solving the difficulties and addressing the anxieties of our residents. It further strengthens our ties with them,” Grandpa Liu said.

However, he also expressed deep worry about the future of the hotline. He complained, “the street [office] apportions too many things for us to do. Each of our social workers can barely cope with them. The street still holds its old mind, trying to order us to do this or that. What can we do for our residents if we’ve always busy with the street office’s business? The hotline is a good example. When a call comes in, one of us has to leave his/her works that are at hand and has to help the caller. We promise our residents instant help over the hotline, but we simply feel too overworked to handle such a high volume of calls while tons of governmental works are piling up on the desk.”

Grandpa Liu Jingyu, a 69-year old retired vice-President at Xinanlou Middle School, feels rather frustrated whenever he talks the conflict between the street office’s assignments and his committee’s intended to-do list. He certainly hopes to keep and even invest more energy into the hotline, but he has to be realistic about the workloads his committee has already had. As a matter of fact, his committee often needs to balance the jobs from the street office and its own self-ruling initiatives.

Residents Committee and Its Three Statutory Functions

This tense situation of controversy is not unique for the Shiyuan Residents Committee at all. As the second story of the Deji Residents Committee in the first chapter shows, the Residents Committee in general is heavily influenced by the street office. Ostensibly the committee was mostly an instrument of the state for social control in the pre-reform era, even though it did deliver some limited services (Benewick, 1991; Clark, 1989; Jankowiak, 1993; Whyte and Parish, 1984; Wu 2002). There was little room to care for local residents since it was largely occupied by the state's social control initiatives. Indeed, the committee even had to act in ways that directly conflicted with the interests of residents when it was ordered to carry out unpopular state policies like political study, household security inspection or sending sons and daughters of residents to remote rural areas.

However, when the legal language is examined that establishes the Residents Committee, it can be clearly seen that it is intended (in word, at least, if not in fact) to be much more than just an instrument of social control. Both the Constitution and the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees designate it as "the only legitimate neighborhood self-governing organization," which should not only help the state to maintain social order, but also serve its residents and promote neighborhood self-governance. Article 3 in the Organic Law specifies the following three functions.

First, the committee should provide public service to its residents. Service provision can be divided into two categories: administrative service and self-governing service. The former refers to the state-sponsored service, and although the

primary goal of these is to address the state's concerns, the service also benefits local residents. The latter refers to the committee-sponsored service that directly responds to residents' requests but without linkage with the state.

Second, the committee should defend and represent residents' interests. As a self-governing organization, it should: (a) protect residents' rights, (b) convey their concerns to local governments, and (c) advice local governments over neighborhood affairs. These functions all fall under the category of neighborhood self-governance, i.e., they all involve the responsiveness and accountability of the committee to its constituents.

Third, the committee should assist the state in managing the neighborhood in three areas: (a) publicizing laws, educating residents, and promoting a "socialist-style" of civilization; (b) facilitating government's policies; and (c) maintaining public security.

Within each statutory function there are numerous detailed roles a committee usually plays. Table 2-1 lists some of these major roles. The Organic Law requires the committee to carry out all three functions. However, the committee in practice has encountered great difficulty in balancing these functions, because the law holds within it some inconsistencies and ambiguities.

Table 2-1: Functions of the Residents Committee¹⁵

Social control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Surveillance over political dissent, released convicts and other unstable elements Publication and dissemination of state's laws and policies Household registration control Family planning and birth control Floating population control Neighborhood security and preventive investigation Neighborhood dispute mediation Participation in state-sponsored anti-crime campaigns
Administrative service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governmental evaluation, examination, and appraisal Governmental census and survey assistance Social welfare policy implementation Unemployment reduction Environment and cleanup campaign Organizing charity activities Collecting fees Emergency management Community economy
Self-governing service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residential convenient services Neighborhood cleanup and environmental protection Neighborhood security patrol Organizing neighborhood cultural events Fostering, supporting, and coordinating other residential groups or organizations Coordination and cooperation with non-residential organizations Property management
Neighborhood self-governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizing committee elections Organizing various residential meetings Residential financial and decision-making openness Encouraging and mobilizing residential participation Evaluating performance of the Residents Committee Establishing community covenant or neighborhood self-governing pact Conveying residents' concerns to local governments Defending residents' interests or rights vis-à-vis local governments or other organizations

¹⁵ I should acknowledge the potential inadequacy associated with this classification. Some roles, such as neighborhood cleanup and environment protection, perceivably fall into more than one category. In addition, this table is by no means comprehensive to include all observed roles.

The first inconsistency comes from the conflict between the conflicting imperatives of social control and neighborhood self-governance. The Organic Law defines the committee as a “non-governmental” and “self-governing” organization. It is not meant to be part of the state apparatus and should be elected by and responsible to residents. However, the Organic Law also requires the committee to assist local governments in the area of social control. The state has the right to “advise” the committee, which, in practice, often becomes the right to “command” it.

Social control ultimately involves the top-down penetration from the state. In contrast, neighborhood self-governance requires bottom-up representation. Therefore, serving the state is not necessarily compatible with representing residents, especially when the interests of two are at odds. It is often the case that the committee cannot resist the state’s intervention and maintain its own independence and integrity. For example, the committee in the pre-reform era was intrusive and coercive, taking roles like residential mobilization, political campaigning, and neighborhood surveillance. Its relationship with its constituents was, therefore, strained and even antagonistic (Whyte and Parish, 1984). When the state totally dominated the committee’s agenda, it left little space for the committee to address residents’ interests. Ordinary residents were fearful as to what the committee would do, and so the committee itself could thus not gain trust or easy cooperation from its constituents.

The inconsistency is also found in service provision when the committee has to balance between administrative and self-governing services. The area of “administrative services” obviously reflects the state’s intention in may of not all

instances. For example, local governments in China often sponsor street cleanup campaigns several times a year. A clean neighborhood is certainly in the residents' interest. However, these campaigns sometimes require residents to sacrifice their leisure time to participate on an involuntary basis. In contrast, self-governing initiatives—such as the Sunshine Community Hotline in the Shiyan Community—are created to address the idiosyncratic needs of each community, and are largely irrelevant to the state's priority or agenda. Given limited resource, the committee often needs to make a choice between administrative and self-governing services.

The functions of the committee reflect the cooperation, conflict, negotiation, and resolution of the structured interests inside urban communities. Deeply immersed in intensive state-resident interactions, the committee provides clues to understanding how the lively neighborhood politics take place on daily basis. The primary goal of this project is—in the first place—to learn the functions of the organization and its interactions with the state and residents. By comparing several committees in this, the project draws can then make several inferences about grassroots state-resident relations in contemporary China.

Analytical Framework

The analytical frameworks used to study neighborhood organizations vary, depending on the focus of the research being done. And needless to say, there are several possible ways that researchers can focus on neighborhood organizations. For instance, the instrumental utility of neighborhood organizations might be a research focus, where they are looked at as a kind of means to a certain end. Or, they could be viewed as voluntary, spontaneous, and self-governing social movements, which have value simply in and of themselves. One could focus on their utility for social welfare, education, hygiene, or other specific social activities. Finally, one could look at them as working models of grassroots social organization and mobilization. Each of these foci would then, of course, necessitate the employment of a different analytical framework. This project adopts a framework based on examining the ways that the Residents Committee is structurally connected to both the state and urban residents. Consequently, the analytical framework here employed covers not only the generic aspects of the organization, but highlights its more substantive aspects as well. More importantly, to understand the committee from the state-society dimension underlines the uniqueness of the organization from neighborhood organizations in other countries.

The analytical framework in this project addresses two fundamental arrangements that are crucial to any political regime in the world today. The first such arrangement involves the concept of “functional differentiation.” Simply put, it implies the necessity of different institutions taking on different functions in modern

society; and relatedly the concept brings with it the fact that the state—no matter how strong it is—can never perform all these different functions. As a result, a neighborhood organization in a place like China (despite its seemingly ‘trivial’ functions) can be seen to acquire an indispensable societal function.

This fact about neighborhood organizations bridges into the second aspect of the political arrangement: the principle of power (de)centralization. In any modern country, a certain level of power centralization into the hands of the state is necessary for political order and stability at least. However, the extent of centralization varies in different systems at different times. History has taught many lessons about the dangers of over-centralization. The ways a neighborhood organization behaves can thus be used as indicators to probe the extent of the power of (de)centralization in a society.

Therefore, the Resident Committees and its functions reflect both the generic and substantive aspects of Chinese politics, even though the organization at first appears miniscule and dispensable. There is relatively rich information available about neighborhood organizations, and it offers up huge spectrums of experience that reflect how they function in different national contexts. Starting from some of this literature and some of these experiences, this project draws four “ideal” or “constructed” models which establish the baseline of an analytical framework.¹⁶ Each ideal model portrays a functionally distinctive committee, and each will be used for

¹⁶ The concept of using ideal or constructed model borrows from Max Weber (see Weber 1946).

focusing on a different pattern of state-resident interaction in Chinese urban communities.

The Penetrative Model

As its name implies, the model treats neighborhood organizations as instruments of the state to dominate society. It is a well-developed model borrowed from the specific literature of the Residents Committee as well as the broad literature of communist and other highly controlled regimes. The penetrative model follows an extreme statist understanding about state-society relations. This model elaborates on the idea of total state domination over society, arguing the elimination of distinctions between private sphere and state domain. That is, any legally established grassroots organization within the context of the state-citizen interaction would necessarily be dominated by public activity oriented toward the pursuit of the interest of the state (or the leading class). This is what Arendt (1951) and Tsou (1986) called “totalitarianism,” in which politics, economy, and social life are intermingled and unified so that they can better serve the will of the state.

The penetrative model offers a unique perspective to understand how a highly centralized state machine is connected with ordinary citizens in China. Under this model, the Residents Committee is seen as nothing more than an instrument of the state for neighborhood control. Indeed, the literature has revealed the coercive nature of the committee before the reform era (White, 1971). During the various political campaigns, the state dominated the committee, and through it, imposed authority, maintained control, and gained compliance from urban disassociates who could not

be effectively managed through the state-controlled *danwei* system (Salaff, 1971).

Existing in the tiny interstice between the state and citizens, the committee functioned like a link in the state's power chain, transferring the state's commands downwards into every resident's private life.

In the penetrative model, the state and the committee often maintain a strictly hierarchical relationship, and the committee has no autonomy from the state at all. The state controls not only the committee's daily operations, but also its internal structure (Lewis, 1971). This dominant relationship makes it so that the committee's primary goal is to maintain social control within its neighborhood. Service provision thus is only a trivial function, as most of its energy is devoted to neighborhood policing and surveillance. Being a tool of social control, it was not necessarily violent when confronting ordinary residents, even in the Cultural Revolution. However, its relationship with urban citizens was often tense since it treated them as subjects rather than as constituents (Whyte and Parish, 1984, pp. 281-284). Residents were often passively involved in the committee's calls for actions. Citizen participation was low or "involuntarily high," so to speak. This was the case during various political campaigns before the late 1970s, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Finally neighborhood self-governance is largely irrelevant to the committee in the penetrative model.

Certainly, most China observers give less and less weight to totalitarianism as the defining characteristic of Chinese politics in the reform era. But despite the waning trend, there are still totalitarian elements inherent in the system which can

exert significant coercion when necessary, such as cracking down on political dissidents, *Falun Gong*, and criminals. The Spring Festival security plan in the Deji Residents Committee is a clear reminder of the historical continuity in the coercive side of the committee. The committee still exerts indispensable role in neighborhood policing and compliance-gaining when the state decides to show its coercive muscle (Read, 2003). Therefore, the penetrative model poses some interesting questions about the committee and about the nature of neighborhood residents and state interactions: How much coercion on the part of the state is the committee still engaged in the reform era? To what extent is social control still its primary function and what is the attitude of the committee towards its social control function today? How effectively does the authoritarian state penetrate down into the urban grassroots level in contemporary China?

The Corporatist Model

It refers a particular set of policies and institutional arrangements for structuring interest representation. The idea of corporatism can be roughly split into two camps. The first camp is “social” or “democratic” corporatism, which has been widely practiced in Austria, Switzerland, Germany and some Northern European countries. It interprets the political process in terms of democratic competition, ideologies of social partnership, concentrated interest representation, and informal but continuous political bargaining among interest groups (business enterprises and labor unions in particular), bureaucracies, and political parties (Katzenstein, 1984). Social corporatism is often used to explain the integration of conflicting interests in stable

democracies. However, for non-democratic countries where electoral competition does not exist and the society is often atomized, social corporatism has limited usage.

In order to understand state-society interactions in some non-democratic regimes, the second camp of corporatism, “state” corporatism, was developed in the 1930s and 1970s when the state-society relations in Fascist Germany and Italy, and some of the military governments in Latin America and Franco’s Spain were under consideration (Cardoso and Faletto, 1984; O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead, 1986). A repressive state often charters or even creates interest groups, attempts to regulate their number, and gives them the nominal status of a quasi-representational monopoly along with special prerogatives. In return, the state claims the right to monitor these representational groups through a variety of mechanisms so as to discourage the development of unwelcome groups or conflicting interests. Through the collusion with those interest groups, the state extends and strengthens its control over a large population. The state would not be able to achieve this if it totally relied upon its own coercive muscle. It is this collusion between the state and certain interest groups that represents the difference between the corporatist model and the penetrative model. The state establishes a kind of patron-client compliance in the corporatist model, which is quite distinct from the sort of principal-agent hierarchy that comes with the penetrative model. The state is obviously dominant in both models, however.

State corporatism has been employed both to explain the success and to highlight challenges of the Chinese era of economic reform. Jean Oi once attributed

the corporatism as the key institution for the rapid growth of rural industrialization.

In the process local governments have taken on many characteristics of a business corporation, with officials acting as the equivalent of a board of directors. This merger of state and economy characterizes a new institutional development that I label *local state corporatism* (Oi, 1992, p. 100).

However, while this type of arrangement contributes perhaps one of the most dynamic economic sectors in China, this “Local State Inc.” headed by public officials rather than real entrepreneurs has created a heaven for corruption and inefficiency.

The privileges that are available through the corporatist coalition are becoming increasingly predatory and market distorting, which causes unprecedented public resentment (Lu, 2000). Many observers have expressed their deep worry about the extent to which the economic reform is thwarted as the result of the corporatist collusion (Duckett, 2001; Gong, 1997; Johnston and Hao, 1995; Yao, 2002).

When the corporatist model is used to analyze the committee, it highlights at least one interesting possibility for neighborhood politics. The Chinese law gives the committee monopolistic status in the representation of residential communities. In this corporatist model, the state, as the patron, provides the committee with legal status and necessary support for its daily operations. In return, the committee, as the client, takes the state’s interests as its priority in urban neighborhoods. The legal status guarantees the centralization of power in the hands of the committee. The important decisions are primarily reached behind the scenes between the state and the committee, and its members (and perhaps the neighborhood activists) are the elite group in a neighborhood that wins prerogatives from the state in exchange for their obedience.

Since a corporatist Residents Committee relies on the state's endorsement for legitimacy and power, the state has enormous influence over its operation. Social control is likely the priority of the committee under such a corporatist arrangement.

However, a corporatist committee might engage in limited service provision for its residents. Unlike with the penetrative model, a corporatist committee is free to function somewhat benevolently because of the very way in which it is structured. The committee members and neighborhood activists need to gain cooperation from ordinary residents in order to maintain effective social control. Service provision, such as immunization and other basic health care services, is an expedient way to reduce animosity and increase cooperation from residents. The operation of the committee also reduces the profile of the state inside the neighborhoods, and, therefore, cushions grassroots pressure for changes.

However, the type of services that a corporatist committee provides is selective and discriminatory under most circumstances. The dependent nature of the committee determines that most services that it provides are administrative services. Since the committee rarely involves ordinary residents in its major decision-making process, the self-governing service initiatives are hardly reached into its agenda.

Finally, despite claiming to represent all residents, a corporatist committee has little to do with interest representation for ordinary residents. Instead, it serves as a filter for managing and manipulating ordinary residents by monopolizing legitimate channels of interest expressions inside its neighborhood. The interests of the state and the committee are the only interests attended to while unwelcome voices are blocked

from reaching the state.

The corporatist model contributes an alternative possibility to the penetrative model in grassroots state-society transformation. The collusion of elites at the level of the neighborhood organization will produce the kind of committee that has to lean upon the authoritarian state and will almost always pay lesser attention to voices of ordinary residents. If, however, the state's total control over neighborhood affairs was no longer feasible, it is interesting to know if the authoritarian state was capable of maintaining effective control through corporatist arrangements. What are mechanisms that make state-committee collusion possible? To what extent does this collusion hurt ordinary residents? What is the sustainability of the corporatist arrangement in neighborhood control?

The Civil Disobedience Model

In sharp contrast to the penetrative model and the corporatist model, the studies on the former communist countries reveals another useful model – the civil disobedience model. This model assumes inevitable conflict between civil society and a repressive state, no matter whether the state represents the will of a class, an elite group, or itself. Therefore, the distinction between the repressive state and civil society, as well as the independence and self-identification of civic organizations, are absolutely crucial for the development of civil society. This model often dismisses the real capacity of the repressive regime to exert social control and penetration. Instead, political dissidents have opportunities to create alternative structure outside of the state, a polis that is parallel to the state (Arato, 1981; Frolic, 1997; Shue, 1988). In

practice, it stresses the power that civil society has of deploying pragmatic strategies that can deal with the repressive state. Hence, it advocates silent non-conformity, gradual opposition, and civil disobedience from below, pressuring the repressive regime to make concessions, like Michnik's "new evolutionism" (1985) and Gorbachev's "socialist pluralism" (1998). If the penetrative model describes a political regime-dynamic of top-down domination, the civil disobedience model emphasizes an interest regime built or characterized by bottom-up transformation.

The sudden collapse of the former USSR and East European communist blocks has been explained from many different perspectives. It has been discussed in terms of bureaucratic politics, institutional and social structural conflicts, individual power struggles, or in terms of the movements and ideological shifts that are inevitably part of international politics. The civil disobedience model contributes a unique perspective in which dissenting civil society becomes an important element of democratic transition because of the fact that it penetrates the stagnation of the communist states from the bottom up. It attempts to understand the macro political transitions from the state-civil society interactions. Since civil society is inherently opposed by its very nature to any despotic power, the conflict between civic organizations and a communist state becomes inevitable. Depending on the power balance, the democratic transition is possible at certain stages when disobedience civic organizations are mobilized into concerted opposition. Ultimately, this model

echoes the liberal concept of civil society developed in the Western literature.¹⁷

A defining characteristic for such a parallel polis is that it is “capable, to a limited degree at least, of supplementing the generally beneficial and necessary functions that are missing in the existing structures, and where possible, to use those existing structures to humanize them” (Kiss, 1972, p. 27). That said, as part of the parallel polis to the state, the Residents Committee is supposed to compete with the state at the grassroots level to win recognition and legitimacy from ordinary residents. Therefore, it should be first and foremost an advocate and defender of residential interests. It should also manage itself as a care provider, i.e., the main provider for self-governing services in a neighborhood.

The committee follows the principle of self-governance, which is at odds with the state’s penetrative imperative. It is unlikely to suppose, however, that the committee will directly confront the monolith of the state. It could, indeed, silently promote its interests through the “weapons of the weak”—for instance by engaging in only minimal cooperation with the state or by engaging in the covert delay, distortion, and even destruction of policies from the state (Scott, 1985). Social control would then unlikely be the function of a disobedient committee because the state would eventually be too wary of it to trust it.

The civil disobedience model is part of the liberal mantra that dominates state-society studies on China. The literature on the Villagers Committee shows how the

¹⁷ Civil society is widely believed as a pillar for a healthy democracy in the Western literature. A classical example is Alexis de Tocqueville, who attributed the vigor of American democracy partially to a free and decentralized civil society (Tocqueville, 1945).

mantra dictates the explorative processes that are applied to China. Indeed, both the Villagers Committee and the Residents Committees would not be fundamentally different from civil organizations in liberal democratic polities, should they truly observe their statutory status designated to them by the Constitution. However, the complaint from Grandpa Liu Jingyu of the Shiyan Residents Committee and the security plan in the Dejia Residents Committee at least raises caution about the liberal interpretation of state-society relations to the Chinese context. How significant is the Residents Committee to the authoritarian state as well as to an emerging civil society? Is it moving toward a “parallel polis” as the dissent grassroots organizations did in former Eastern European countries? If this is the case in China, how could the Residents Committee play non-conformity games with the authoritarian state? Could it spearhead a democratic transformation in urban communities, as the Villagers Committee is believed doing in rural villages? No matter what the answers to these questions would be, the civil disobedience model offers a unique perspective on how and to what extent the committees—that are found in China and elsewhere—performs the function of neighborhood self-governance and resist or defy, either overtly or covertly, the will of the authoritarian state.

The Synergistic Model

This model is derived primarily from the theory of the developmental state that focuses on economic growth as the positive result of synergistic relations between the state, often authoritarian in nature, and the private business elite (Amsden, 1989; Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1982; Okimoto, 1989; Wade, 1990; World

Bank, 1993). The theory attempts to “liberate” the state from the indoctrination of the liberal mantra that tends to portray an active state as an obstacle rather a facilitator for economic growth. Taking economic growth as a nationalistic project, a developmental state could play a combination of different roles at various stages of growth, such as custodian, demiurge, midwife, and husbandry.¹⁸ The specific roles a state takes on have varied across time and across economic sectors, and theorists that have contributed to the synergistic model of thought have spent much time deliberating upon which roles are appropriate and when. The idea of the developmental state in general, though—no matter the circumstances—is closely tied to the desirability and importance of “good government” for the development of later industrializing countries.

The synergistic model shifts the focus from state-private business co-production ideas to ideas that involve state-grassroots organization cooperation. Its theoretical orientation goes beyond treating grassroots development either as a non-state business, such as social capital inherited from natural endowments of history and culture as Putnam argues, or a spontaneous antithesis to the repressive state as the literature of social movements in East European countries indicates.¹⁹ The synergistic model tries to bridge public-private division and advocates state-society cooperation

¹⁸ Peter Evans (1995, pp. 74-98) has summarized the economic functions a state can play. Custodian means regulator. Demiurge is the involvement of a state in directly productive activities. Midwife describes a state’s policy initiatives that assist or induce private capitals to take on more challenging endeavors. Related to midwife, husbandry focuses on support and prodding a state enacts to the existing private counterparts to sustain in competitive businesses, particularly in today’s global economy.

¹⁹ For example, Putman (1993) treats the repository of social capital as a casual factor for the better bureaucratic performance in northern Italy, i.e., the state is determined not determinative.

as a key institutional factor for grassroots development (Evans, 1996; Fox, 1992; Gupta, Grandvoinet and Romani, undated World Bank paper; Heller, 1995; Ostrom, 1996; Tandler, 1997; Warner, 1999; World Bank, 2004).

Following the synergistic model, neighborhood organizations are not considered to be totally independent of the state or totally dependent on it for their genesis. The Residents Committees should be interpreted as major partners with whom and through whom the state can enhance its developmental goals inside the microcosmic world of its neighborhoods. As neighborhood affairs become increasingly complicated and indigenized at the same time that they become less sensitive to the national politics, empowering the committee to handle these challenges is in the state's best interest. In contrast, the committee also requires assistances from the state so as to satisfy the increasing demands from its constituents and to cope with those problems that are often beyond its capacity alone, such as crime and floating population. The synergistic model dictates that the state and the committee formulate a cooperative relationship; one in which both need to seek assistance from each other to boost their legitimacy in the eyes of residents. Identifying the areas to co-produce win-win results is critical for the synergy. Service provision is thus the easiest function to build such synergy. A direct outcome from the synergy is the net benefit to local residents, i.e., the improvement of quality and quantity of services at the neighborhood level. It is the most salient characteristic for synergy model.

The synergistic model is obviously different from the other models discussed

so far. It implies a different reality of political development from the total domination of the political regime in the penetrative model, the grassroots uprising in the civil disobedience model, or the collusion implied by the corporatist model. Instead, the synergy is a rather intricate arrangement for mutual enhancement, as Evans argues:

Creative action by government organizations can foster social capital; linking mobilized citizens to public agencies can enhance the efficacy of government. The combination of strong public institutions and organized communities is a powerful tool for development (Evan, 1996, p. 1130).

If such a synergy could take place, the enhancement of the committee would show not only in the improvement of its service provision capacity, but also in the effective functioning of mechanisms of neighborhood self-governance. Its intensive cooperation with the state would gain trust from the state, which helps it move towards becoming a relatively autonomous grassroots entity. In addition, its self-governing function becomes easier when it fosters intimacy with ordinary residents as a result of better services.

The synergistic relationship certainly implies a calling for the committee to address the state's concerns, such as social control. Indeed, in the current Chinese political context, a viable self-governance would have to begin with governing initiatives from the state. A committee whose destination of self-governance is a "parallel polis" would not win trust from the state, and would be unlikely to exist in contemporary China.

The state-society synergy has been observed in some non-democratic countries, such as Vietnam, Senegal, and Nepal. As Evans argues, "the synergy is constructable, even in the more adverse circumstances typical of Third World

countries” (Evans, 1996, p. 1119). Would a synergistic relationship be built between the authoritarian state and the Residents Committee in China? This question raises the opportunity for a different outlook of state-resident relations channeled through and withheld in the committee. The focus is to rethink the effort of the authoritarian state in formulating mutually empowering structures with grassroots organizations, like the committee, for non-zero-sum outcomes.

The biggest challenge for the synergistic model is that it is not as neatly cut as the other three models. The synergistic theory pays enough attention to explain the empirical level questions about development, but seems somewhat reluctant to further draw conclusions concerning the deeper political questions that are implied by the model. Indeed, some interesting puzzles are created in a scenario of state-society synergy. What makes the synergy possible? Why would the Chinese communist state choose cooperation with the committee? What characteristics does the committee have that enable it to establish synergistic relations, rather than subordinate, collusive, or conflictive relations with the state? What are the political consequences of the synergy of the state and ordinary residents? These are politically significant questions, which are germane to grassroots politics in contemporary China.

So far, this chapter has discussed four ideal models that can be used to understand state-resident relations intermediated through the committee. Each ideal model draws a distinctive combination of functions a committee might play. Together, they make up the analytical framework of this project. For better reading, summarizes the four ideal models with their corresponding statutory function(s).

Table 2-2: Analytical Framework – Ideal Models and Statutory Functions of the Residents Committee

Model \ Function	Penetrative model	Corporatist model	Civil disobedience model	Synergistic model
Social control	X	X		X
Administrative service		X		X
Self-governing service			X	X
Neighborhood self-governance			X	X

The challenge is to explore the actual functions the committee plays and compare them with the analytical framework in Table 2-2. The comparison tells the suitability of each ideal model to explain neighborhood politics. More importantly, such a test helps to explore grassroots state-society relations in the post-totalitarian China, which is the ultimate goal of this project.

One thing should be clarified here. Any model that can be called “ideal” originates in accordance with the necessity of simplifying the complexity of reality for the purpose of scientific theorization. Reality is always more delicate and more rich than any ideal model can capture. For example, the literature has shown that even a penetrative committee in the pre-reform era had to be involved in providing services to residents from time to time, in accordance with its primary goal of social control. Therefore, Table 2-2 is only a simplified intellectual construction. Rather than reaching deeply into every aspect of a matter, each ideal model is forced to abstract its reasoning by focusing only on the functions that preoccupy the committee.

Neighborhood Organizations: An International Perspective

The above section lays out the analytical framework that is derived from the practice of grassroots organizations in various countries. In order to better situate this project in the literature, this section complements the above theoretical theme with practical discussion of several neighborhood organizations operating from several different national contexts. The functions of those organizations vary from place to place, which provides rich references to understand the functions of the Residents Committee in China.

Neighborhood Organizations in the United States

Neighborhood organizations in the United States have a diffuse and limited leadership in neighborhood governance. American neighborhoods are quite open to many kinds of neighborhood organizations. As such, there is often no particular type of organization that consistently dominates the affairs of American neighborhoods. Neighborhood power is spread across a broad range of institutions; institutions such as neighborhood associations, social service organizations, housing and economic committees, religious organizations, and many ad hoc groups. These organizations are quite different in nature: some of the organizations are public organizations while others are private; some are completely indigenous groups whose leadership rests in its local constituents, while others are local chapters that operate according to the instructions of their national leadership. In addition, given the diverse nature of neighborhood organizations, many policy initiatives that are implemented at the neighborhood level do not originate from residents themselves.

One particular feature is the limited purposes of American neighborhood organizations (Chaskin, 2003). Most organizations are formulated for a particular set of singular, parochial purposes. American neighborhood affairs are often created along issues, such as housing, child education, poverty relief, and neighborhood security. Accordingly, one organization usually has a limited voice; many of them have a voice related to issues that are closely related to the purpose of the organization, but otherwise have no real influence. In addition, these organizations largely focus on neighborhood affairs and local politics. They are largely irrelevant or isolated from state or national politics. Since these organizations are specialized in their narrow fields, coordinated activities in the neighborhood between different organizations have often themselves to be difficult undertakings (Fairbanks and Mooney-Melvin, 2001).

Another unique feature of American neighborhood organizations is their relative independence from the state. The state is traditionally viewed suspiciously in American eyes. The idea of democratic control over the state power is one of the most fundamental American values (Fisher, 1994). Neighborhood organizations are often entrusted with the ideal of “true” democracy, in which civil virtues are fostered and local people directly rule through active participation. These diverse but vibrant neighborhood organizations weave a civil network such that the power of the state is somewhat counterbalanced. As a result, local governments sometimes incur tensions with some neighborhood organizations (Baker, 1995). Certainly, many neighborhood organizations often keep good legal or fiscal relationships with various governmental

agencies. For example, American Residential Community Associations, one of the most popular neighborhood organizations, has to win approval from government before they can operate in any particular neighborhood (Dilger, 1992).²⁰ Another powerful organization with many local chapters called Neighborhood Association heavily relies on federal Community Development Block Grants, and many other federal and state funding sources. However, despite these and other linkages with the state, most neighborhood organizations are able to maintain their institutional independence reasonably well. The impacts of the state on these organizations are largely confined to support, consulting, and, to a much lesser extent, regulating and controlling.

In general, American neighborhood organizations represent a diffuse, pluralized, and specialized leadership in the arena of neighborhood governance. These organizations usually keep a high degree of independence from the state. The power of these organizations within a neighborhood comes either directly from the neighborhood (the residents) or from outside non-governmental institutions, both of which aim at addressing residents' concerns and representing their interests. Serving the state's interest or maintaining social control is not the primary task. Instead, a net of decentralized neighborhood organizations can often counterbalance the state's arbitrary power.

²⁰ Residential Community Associations have over 150,000 units across the America. They are not-profit corporations that are created by real estate developers. They are responsible for housing related neighborhood affairs, such as housing developing, property management, and enforcement of covenants, rules, and regulations.

Committee for the Defense of the Revolution in Cuba

If the United States presents a typical example of what neighborhood governance looks like in a liberal and open society, then the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (or CDR) in Cuba shows what a neighborhood organization could look like or be capable of in a repressive and closed society.

Unlike the American neighborhood organizations whose primary roles involve grassroots self-governance, the role of the CDR is largely a coercive one; it is charged with the maintenance of social and political control at the micro-level of blocks and streets in Cuba. The CDR members are required to perform “voluntary work” in the field and to attend political meetings. These activities tend to strengthen the state’s political influence over individuals and to keep the neighborhoods under control. The mass organization of the CDR also hinders the involvement of other organizations in neighborhood affairs; the CDR monopolizes the public sphere and claims the right to exclusively represent all officially recognized social and occupational groups in Cuba. It keeps society atomized and weak through surveillance, peer pressure, and constant interference in the private sphere (Aguirre, 1984).

In addition, the CDR has a highly centralized and hierarchical structure, which also sharply differs from the diffused leadership structure seen in American neighborhood organizations. Cuban has nearly eight million CDR members. The power of this organization is centralized in a very small CDR elite core, however. To some extent, the CDR functions like a highly disciplined political party. Those local CDRs that are present in neighborhoods, on farms, at factories, or even local

bureaucratic structure are controlled by numerous regional CDRs, which ultimately receive orders from the national center of the CDR. The leadership inside the CDR is strictly top-down, with decisive power placed in the hands of the national directorate (Fagen, 1969).

The CDR is primarily a political organization. Its national directorate usually has about thirty members, all of whom are ruling party members. Its national coordinator is even a member of the Communist Party's central committee. Similarly, most leaders of the lower CDRs are also party members and, not surprisingly, are members of the local elite. Those leaders often have opportunities to be promoted to higher levels of the party hierarchy after serving several years in the CDRs.

The centralized leadership structure and party pre-eminence that dominates the affairs of the CDR in Cuba inevitably leads to the fact that the CDR is always positioning the social control prerogatives of the state as its top priorities. In practice, the CDR has kept a very close relationship with Cuba's Ministry of the Interior (Minint) and often actively participated in repression against dissidents and protesters. "Partly through its use of the CDRs, partly through its own agents, Minint can obtain information on the daily activities of every person in Cuba" (Aguirre, 2002, p. 92). As political instability has intensified, the CDRs have even been partially militarized to maintain effective control.

During the present crisis, military officers have been in charge of institutions and state organizations. Thus in 1990, for the first time, an army general was made national coordinator of the CDRs, and the mass organization was made part of the Ministry of the Armed Forces (Minfar). A plethora of new or reactivated social control agencies with a military element or influence have been created, recreated, and at times consolidated. They include the Territorial

Troop Militia and the Armed Forces National Defense College, the latter opened in 1991. The National Social Prevention and Attention Commission was created in 1986 to improve the vigilance of the CDRs, while the vigilance brigades started in Santiago de Cuba in 1991, the same year as the peasant vigilance detachments (Aguirre, 2002, p. 77).

In general, the CDRs are active in at least four areas of social control. First, it is the eyes and ears of the state on every city block. Each CDR has a core group of activists who spy on ordinary residents, and they also have certain coercive power that can be used against its constituents.

Second, the CDR often acts as the frontier policy executor on a wide range of issues from putting anti-revolutionaries under house arrest to rationing basic food and clothing to the citizens of Cuba. The CDR is indeed very effective in rallying the masses around the state's agenda.

Third, the mass organization of the CDR makes a priority of streamlining the ideological orientation of its members through study and education about government policies, documents, and laws. It also regularly organizes several political study groups, targeting everyone from children to career people to the elderly, with the clear intention of infusing state-accepted ideologies and behaviors into them (Fox and Starn, 1997).

Fourth, the CDR is a critical instrument of the state that can be used to mobilize the masses. The membership for the CDR is not based on volunteering, and is in fact highly discriminatory in the sense that it is very careful to keep out political dissidents or those who are vocally opposed to the regime. Despite this fact, though, ordinary residents are pressured to join the CDR, participate its activities and pay

their monthly membership fees. Indeed, despite its meticulousness in attempting to keep subversives out, a CDR membership has become a requirement for normal life in Cuba (Dominguez, 1978, p. 264). The consequences of being a nonmember of the CDR are unpleasant at best and might be devastating under extreme circumstances.

There were periods in the history of the CDR when it had tried deviating from the priority of internal security by espousing a more diverse and politically neutral agenda. However, it proved fruitless when the deviation moved beyond ran afoul of the tolerance of the state. As a result, the national directorate had been purged several times so as to restore the idea of revolutionary vigilance as the absolute priority of the CDR (Fernandez, 2000).

***Chokai* in Japan**

The United States and Cuba provide examples of distinctive—and essentially polarized—prototypes of neighborhood organizations. American neighborhood organizations prioritize neighborhood self-governance while the Cuban CDR stresses social and political control. Japan contributes the third type of neighborhood associations within this spectrum.

Japanese neighborhood association is called the *Chokai* (or *chonaikai*). It has a long history that can be traced to the neighborhood responsibility system of the Tokugawa era (1600-1868), in which the urban neighborhoods shared responsibility for tax payment, public order, fire fighting, and infrastructure maintenance. The *Chokai* has many similarities with the CDR in Cuba. Like the CDR, the *Chokai* is a very comprehensive neighborhood organization, and it is operated through monthly

dues from each family in the neighborhood. The *Chokai* provides a unified leadership over a wide range of neighborhood issues and happenings. And though it is theoretically a voluntary organization, membership in the *Chokai* is still almost universal (Sorensen, 2002, p. 343).

The *Chokai* maintains a close relationship with Japanese central and local governments. A commonly accepted fact is that the main function of the *Chokai* is to carry information and directives down from various governmental levels to regular people and, to a much lesser extent, operates in the reverse direction, to carry residents' requests and demands up to the state. In fact, the *Chokai*'s extreme affinity with the state provides a very effective means of social control, descending in vertical hierarchical connection from the top levels of administration into virtually every family in the nation. Its coercive function was exploited to its fullest extent during World War II (Dore, 1958, p. 272). In the 1930s and 1940s, the *Chokai* was an integral element of the Japanese totalitarian system. It actively promoted imperialism and nationalism, spying and policing deviant behavior, distributing rations, and squeezing savings from neighborhoods for the war effort. The *Chokai* was temporarily abolished during the post-war occupation, but it began regrouping (usually under a slightly different name) with many of the same members and boundaries that had been previously established (Bestor, 1989). Today, the *Chokai* is still very useful in insulating and diffusing grassroots pressure on Japanese local governments (Sorensen, 2002, p. 107).

However, despite its role in social control, the *Chokai* is different from the CDR in Cuba. The most salient difference is that the *Chokai* is much less coercive than the CDR. In Cuba, political control is the dominant agenda and embedded into neighborhood management. In contrast, politics is largely played at national and municipal levels in Japan, and thus the affairs of neighborhood are not generally made a first priority by the Japanese state. Although the *Chokai* still keeps civil defense functions (such as neighborhood watch, criminal monitoring, etc.) these functions are politically neutral and are not coercive in nature. Despite the responsiveness it has to the state, the *Chokai* is no longer a purely top-down organization. As Japanese society is pluralizing, the *Chokai* has gradually moved towards the liberal end of the social-governmental spectrum. It has become increasingly self-organized and responsive to the demands of its constituents in recent years (Garon, 1997). In contrast, Cuba has achieved little by way of efforts to neutralize the political domination-functions that have been the bailiwick of the CDR, and it has taken virtually no steps to increase the accountability of the CDR to its members (Fernandez, 2000).

The most distinctive feature differentiating the *Chokai* from both American neighborhood organizations and from the Cuban CDR is its role of comprehensive service provision to local residents. Unlike the CDR—which is still largely operated according to imperatives of social control—the *Chokai* has gradually shifted its primary role from one of social control to one of neighborhood service in the years since World War Two. Japanese today are increasingly accepting the *Chokai* as a

service provider instead of as a low-level auxiliary body of local government. The existence of the *Chokai* contributes to the quality of urban life, the sense of community, and the degree of self-reliance in a Japanese neighborhood, which is similar to what American neighborhood organizations are doing. However, the way that a *Chokai* serves its neighborhood is quite different from the way an American organization would. Neighborhood services in the US are decentralized and are largely uncoordinated. They are usually made available and coordinated through many organizations that follow in line either with grassroots initiatives or along with the leadership of non-governmental outsiders. And—as would be expected in America—the state maintains a very low profile in neighborhood services. By contrast, neighborhood services are provided in a much more unified and comprehensive manner in Japan, where the *Chokai* functions as an overarching umbrella-like organizer. The *Chokai* generally administers a broad range of services. The following presents only a partial list of such service and some of the things that the *Chokai* is involved with: garbage collection and recycling arrangements, neighborhood cleanup and beautification, vaccination campaigns, neighborhood watch activities, organization of local festivals and block parties, information dissemination, and many other activities in particular areas (Garon, 1997). In addition, the *Chokai* often keeps a close relationship with local administrators in service provisions—especially those services that are initiated from the government but benefiting local residents. Through cooperation with the state, the *Chokai*

strengthens not only its legitimacy as the leading neighborhood organization, but also its actual capacity to provide services to its constituents.

In general, the *Chokai* represents a mixed model, located somewhere on the spectrum between the extreme models presented by American neighborhood organizations and the Cuban CDRs. It displays some elements of grassroots democracy, and yet it also maintains a strong affinity for the imperatives of the state regarding social control. The comprehensive nature of service provision capacity and responsibilities in addition to the close relationship with the state enjoyed by the *Chokai* reflects the spirit of the long and deep tradition of “state sponsored capitalism” or the “developmental state” (Johnson, 1995). This kind of close linkage with the state gives the *Chokai* greater capacity to service its constituents. However, as far as the model of the interventionist state is concerned (which tries to teach moral ideals and to mold social norms) the autonomy and self-governance components of the *Chokai* are comparatively weak.

Villagers Committee in Rural China

Besides constructing international comparison, this project is also attempting to compare the Chinese urban Residents Committee with its well-known rural twin—the Villagers Committee.

Like the CDR in Cuba, the Villagers Committee carries the state’s imperative to control Chinese rural society. In the 1950s, China adopted a military-like system in rural villages, the commune system. Peasants were treated as a group rather than individuals in a commune. It was a very intrusive and highly controlled system, in

which peasants were highly organized in collective endeavors of production, distribution, and consumption. This proved to be very destructive and costly especially during the “Three Years of Natural Disasters” (1959-1961). The commune system was decollectivized in the late 1970s and replaced by the household contracting system in which peasants gained the usufruct over the land and hence the attendant freedom to dispose of agricultural products for their own profit after meeting the state’s quota. The land reform, marketization, and privatization that happened at this time in rural China partially released peasants from total dependence on the state. Facing the “ocean” of new small-scale farming economy, the state effectively lost the means for mobilizing rural peasants and implementing policies.

In addition, the old rural governing structure proved inappropriate for handling the new challenges. As the rural economy expanded, the state saw the growing decay of the party-state apparatus at the grassroots level and the increasing level of tension present in cadre-peasant relations (Wang, 2003). The elimination of the commune system also quickly induced a decline of social order in the countryside (O’Brien and Li, 2000). Both of these factors contributed to rising crisis of the state’s legitimacy and social control vis-à-vis the state in rural China.

The state needed to fill the grassroots vacuum with some organizations that could achieve its objectives of social control, and yet be not as costly and destructive as the old commune system was. The Villagers Committee was created primarily for this purpose. Today, most social-control related tasks are carried out through the

Villagers Committee (i.e., family planning policy, tax collection, and military conscription, etc.).

However, the way that the Villagers Committee helps the state to maintain social control is not coercive and intrusive in the same way that the CDR is in Cuba. Rather than simply being the puppy of the state, the Villagers Committee is increasingly responsive to peasants' needs (Oi and Rozelle, 2000). Two factors contribute to this new responsiveness.

The first most prominent factor involved is the peasants' increasing desire (sanctioned by the state's consent and molded by its guidance) to participate in the neighborhood decision-making process. When the commune system was abolished, the collective ownership of village property was retained and transferred to the Villagers Committee (Oi, 1989). Many properties in a village, including land, school, roads, irrigation systems, and other similar items of infrastructures, are all still collective-owned today. As the monopoly power over collective property, the Villagers Committee makes decisions that are often critical to each peasant's life. Since collective property gives peasants some sense of ownership, it provides a strong incentive for peasants to care and pay attention what the Villagers Committee is doing. And this in turn provides pressure to the Villagers Committee to be responsive.

In addition, Chinese law creates a legal basis for peasants to participate in—if not to totally control—the operation of the Villagers Committee. The Organic Law of Villagers Committees (1987, revised in 1998) mandates that all members of the Villagers Committee must be directly elected. Besides mandating the need for the

direct election of the committee members, the law also regulates the committee's decision-making process, aiming to increase the popular control over the Villagers Committee by its constituents. These institutional arrangements, especially direct election, show a clear improvement in the Villagers Committee's ability to be responsive to villagers' demands (Pastor and Tan, 2000; Shi, 1999). Many even optimistically conclude that the Villagers Committee is a hope of China's democratic transition. Grassroots democracy is prophesied to be about to take off, and the local administration will continue to be held more accountable, transparent, and efficient through the continued deepening practice extension of the operations of the Villagers Committee (Wang, 1998). Certainly, some researchers still doubt the authenticity of the Villagers Committee elections and its contribution to grassroots democracy (O'Brien and Li, 2000). However, even the most critical observers would not accept the argument that the Villagers Committee is nothing but a CDR-like instrument for social control. Indeed, the Villagers Committee's responsiveness as described above is a feature that distinguished it from the Japanese *Chokai*, the decision-making process of which is often closed to its local Japanese constituents and is more responsive to the state's call.

So far, the above four examples provide some concrete patterns of state-resident interactions in different countries. All but the American neighborhood associations have active agendas in the area of social control. However, the Japanese *Chokai* and Chinese Villagers Committee are less coercive in nature than the Cuban CDR. American neighborhood organizations are likely the most responsive to the will

of their constituents, which is quite opposite to the Cuban CDR, but between these two extremes—in the middle of the spectrum—we find the modeled responsiveness of the Japanese *Chokai* and Villagers Committee. These degrees of responsiveness thus vary between times and locations. All four examples, however, are responsible for service provision in various ways and to differing extents. In the American case, we see the very independent nature of its grassroots organizations from the state, and thus the independent way in which American neighborhood organizations practice and are responsible for service provision; comparatively, the *Chokai* has corporatist connections with the Japanese state. As far as the Chinese example is concerned, the literature often draws a synergistic picture regarding the Villagers Committee and service provision, although some believe that the synergy indeed is corporatist collusion between the state and rural elites. Even in Cuba the CDR tries to engage in providing services to its residents, such as sanitation and immunization, but the scale of those services is very limited.

It is clear that despite the neatness of the picture drawn so far, the four examples show both similarities and differences between their various forms and functions. However, the combination of functions in each distinguishes them from each other. They are all unique cases as far as state-society relations are concerned. The fact that indeed so many similarities and differences are observed warns researchers that they cannot oversimplify the exuberant state-society interactions at the grassroots level with any theoretical framework. No single ideal or theoretic

model can predict or describe or mathematicize the exact functions of the various neighborhood organizations in the four cases.

Nevertheless, the discussions of the four cases bring this investigation into an international context, from which comparisons can be drawn when the Residents Committee is studied.

For example, to what extent is the Chinese Residents Committee similar to the Cuban CDR, in terms of political and social control? Both countries are authoritarian and ostensibly communist. Or an additional question that can be asked is this: has the Residents Committee been primarily restructured to be a service provider in addition to being an entity of social control, as has happened in the case of the *Chokai* in Japan? How responsive is the committee to its residents? Can it balance the power of the state with the needs and aspirations of its constituents, as its American counterparts do? In addition, has Residents Committee become another bright “star” in grassroots democracy as the Villagers Committee has been widely interpreted to have become?

Before any of these questions can be adequately addressed, however, the true nature and origin and culture of the Residents Committee must be understood. The rest of this section is thus devoted to providing information about the legal status and the history of the Residents Committee. I will start with a story from the third Residents Committee I visited: the Huashan Residents Committee on the outskirts of Tianjin City.

The Legal and Practical Status of the Residents Committee

On a rainy morning in May 2004 some strident noises attracted my attention soon after I arrived in the Huashan Community. I quickly crammed my bicycle into a topsy-turvy cluster of bicycles and rushed into the office of the Huashan Residents Committee. An angular mid-age woman with her sloppy pajamas, standing in the middle of the main office, exchanged fire with Ms. Liu Yixi. Ms. Liu is the head of the community security subcommittee under the Huashan Residents Committee. I immediately recognized the angry woman as well, who was called an “unfriendly frequenter” in private by some committee members. The woman, a recently laid-off textile worker, demanded that Ms. Liu punished her neighbor, since she suspected that her neighbor secretly cut off her sapling mulberry. Her accusation was simple: nobody but her neighbor would do that since they had quarrels over the protrusion of the tree limbs into her neighbor’s garden.

“Why do you not ask XXX to compensate my losses? How many times do you want me come here?” she shouted at Ms. Liu.

“Where is your evidence? What do you want me to do? Arrest XXX!?” I have repeated hundreds of times that I could not help you if you could not prove it.” Liu replied with some impatience.

Liu’s attitude further irritated the women. She pointer her finger at Ms. Liu and roared, “My tree is dead. That is the evidence! What else do you want me to prove? Then, what do you do here? Just wasting time? You committee members are do-nothing and impotent!”

Feeling offended, Liu raised her voice too. “If you think you can win, go to the police station or court. I cannot help you. By the way, it is not your business to judge my job, like a dog trying to catch mice – too meddlesome. I tell you that no one can live without us for even just one day, up from the central government all the way down to all Huashan residents.”

The quarrel was soon diffused as other committee members separated both sides. Ms. Liu’s last comment is certainly an impulsive overstatement. However, it

certainly illustrates clearly her attitude about her job. Ms. Liu is not willingly to accept the idea that her “job” is cheap.²¹ Like many other committee members I met, the comments like those that the angry resident made really hurt their self-esteem. Indeed, this is not my only time witnessing such a response from members of the Residents Committees. They sometimes defend their “humble” jobs rather fiercely, since they clearly realize that they are belittled the same way that street cleaners or other manual workers sometimes are by people who knew very little about the committees.

However, what they do is really crucial to neighborhood governance. As urban affairs become increasingly complex and nuanced, the Chinese state relies more and more on the committee to handle the grassroots problems. From a legal perspective, there are a few Chinese organizations with more preminent status than the committee. Article 111 of the Constitution (1982) calls the committee as “grassroots mass self-governing organization” [*jiceng qunzhong xing zizhi zuzhi*]. It is one of the only two grassroots self-governing organizations recognized in the Constitution.²² Tracing its legitimacy directly from the Constitution differentiates the committee from many other urban organizations, governmental or non-governmental.

The Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees, which is derived from the Constitution, further fortifies the committee’s legal status. The Organic Law is so far the most comprehensive and specific law that details the nature, function, and

²¹ It is hard to say that the Residents Committee positions are “vocations” in the conventional way, since the committee members only receive a small amount of stipend for what they do. For all Residents Committees I visited, the stipend is even below the minimum wage level in Tianjin City.

²² The other one is the Villagers Committee in rural China.

structure of the committee. It purports to strengthen the committee by the principle of self-governance and commits it to promoting “local socialist democracy and urban socialist material and spiritual civilization” (Article 1). According to the Law, the committee is not part of the state apparatus; rather, it is an “autonomous mass organization” through which urban citizens manage community affairs, educate themselves, and serve their own needs (Article 2).

However, the importance of the committee means much more than its legal prominence. It is perhaps the oldest and most persistent grassroots organization in China since the creation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.²³ Although it has suffered many setbacks and zigzags from the radical politics during the 1960s and 1970s, the economic reform brings real opportunities for its substantial expansion.

As Chapter One shows, the rapid economic growth in China has experienced has created a severe crisis of governance in Chinese cities. It is not coincident that the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC) promulgated the Organic Law to promote the Residents Committee in December of 1989, a politically chilly year when instable factors in cities congregated into the largest political turmoil in the reform era. The emphasis on rejuvenating the committee can only be fully appreciated if only its practical *de facto* status in urban governance is understood. The administrative structure of Chinese cities is three-tiered. Administration is divided into three levels—city government, district government, and the street office. These

²³ The first Residents Committee was established in Hangzhou City of Zhejiang Province in December 1949.

levels constitute the skeleton of local administration in cities, which also is complemented by several nationwide quasi-governmental associations.²⁴

Both the functional bureaus and quasi-governmental associations do not extend down as far as the district level. The street office acts as a dispatching unit of the district government, which itself aggregates the policies of the quasi-governmental associations into instructions for the street office. In other words, the street office represents the lowest-level, day-to-day, direct administrative presence of the state in Chinese cities. But it does not directly interact with residents on a regular basis.²⁵ Rather than extend its administrative structure down into residential communities, the street office has to get help from the Residents Committee.

The committee is thus present at the nexus of intensive interactions with and between both ordinary residents and the state. It is *the* only non-governmental organization that can legitimately claim to represent all residents within a Chinese urban community. Correlatively, the intimacy that had developed between the committee and the state over the past several decades had earned it trust from the state as being a reliable “arm.”

Because of its critical position in the administration of Chinese cities, the committee has often been treated as a “super-servant” of the state for a long period of

²⁴ They include Family Planning Association [*jihua shengyu xiehui*], China Disabled Persons' Federation [*zhongguo canjiren lianhehui*], China National Women Federation [*zhonghua quanguo funu lianhehui*], China Caring Young Generation Committee [*zhongguo guanxin xiayidai gongzuo weiyuanhui*], Chinese Communist Youth League, Chinese Youth Pioneers, and Health Care Committee for Women and Children [*fuyou baojian weiyuanhui*].

²⁵ The primary hurdle to do so is the limit human resources at the street office level. For example, the Meiyuan Street Office where the Huashan Residents Committee is located has roughly five hundred employees, including permanent and temporary ones. It is impossible for it to handle the infinite and nuanced affairs of fifty-three thousand residents from neighborhood bickering to monitoring released convicts. Similarly, the Pudong Street Office also has fifty thousand residents.

time, despite its statutory power as a self-governing organization. This legal-practical disparity in addition to its unique position hierarchically as a key intermediary between the state and residents inevitably makes the committee an arena that is dense with the fallout of issues that develop between the state and residents.

Table 2-3: Administrative Hierarchy of Tianjin City

Administrative level	District level	Street level	Residents Committee
Heping District Government	1		
• Street Office		6	
○ Residents Committee			101
Hedong District Government	1		
• Street Office		13	
○ Residents Committee			217
Hexi District Government	1		
• Street Office		12	
○ Residents Committee			217
Nankai District Government	1		
• Street Office		12	
○ Residents Committee			229
Hebei District Government	1		
• Street Office		10	
○ Residents Committee			194
Hongqiao District Government	1		
• Street Office		10	
○ Residents Committee			157
Total	6	63	1,115

Source: *Tianjin Statistical Yearbook*, 2003.

Table 2-3 shows the administrative hierarchy in Tianjin City where I conducted my field research. Tianjin City has one city government, six district governments, and sixty-three street offices. It would be an obvious challenge for the Tianjin government to manage 3.7 million urban residents with this limited number of state units, if it did not rely upon the Residents Committees present in the city as the

bridge between itself and ordinary residents (*Tianjin Statistical Yearbook, 2003*). The committees are generally able to help the state implement its goals without overstretching its thin resources. The 1,115 Residents Committees act as a powerful instrument for the completion of this purpose.

Residents Committee from Past to Present

When facing disparagement about the validity of her job, Ms. Liu Yixi at the Huashan Residents Committee responded with boldly defiant language. Her manner to a constituent she was supposed to serve and represent was offensive and negative about the solution of a neighborhood squabble. However, she was right at least in her understanding of the indispensability of her job to both the state and ordinary residents. As Table 2-3 indicates, the Residents Committee is a crucial intermediary between the state and ordinary residents in contemporary China. However, its preeminent status is only a development of recent history. It had been largely marginalized and even abolished for a long period of time before the 1978 reform.

The history of the committee can be divided into four periods (Figure 2-1).

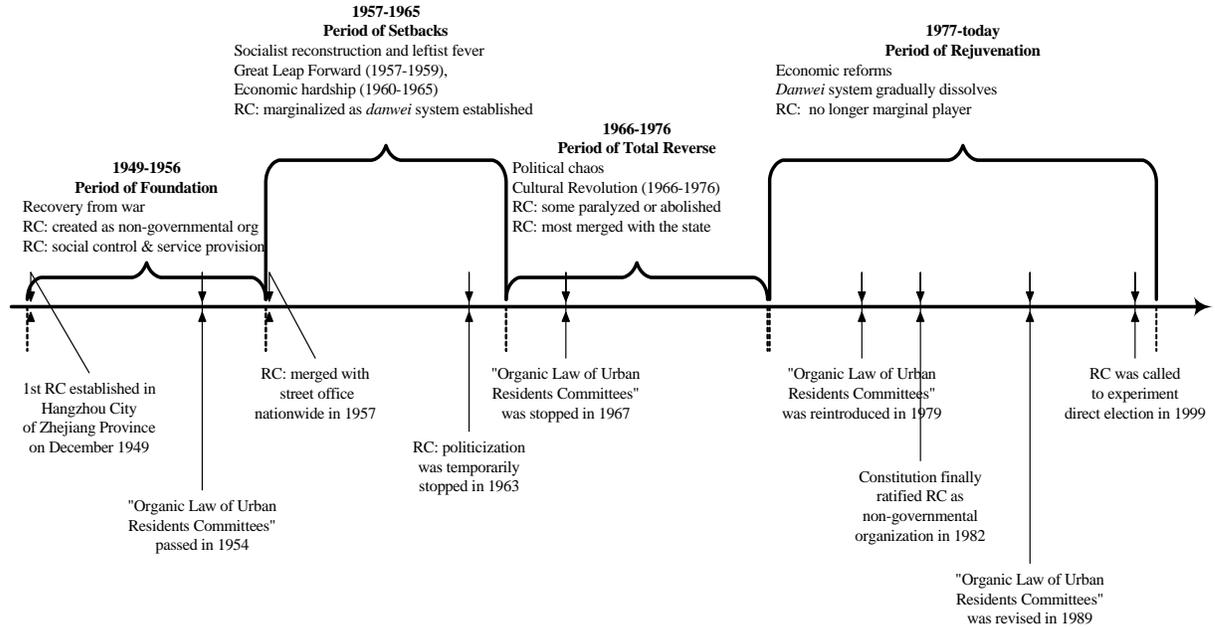


Figure 2-1: Timeline of the Residents Committee

The Period of Foundation: 1949 – 1956

The Kuomintang government before 1949 maintained an urban grassroots administrative system called “the Neighborhood Mutual Responsibility Policing System” [*baojia zhi*], whose history can be traced back to the great reformer, Wang Anshi (1021-1086) of the Song Dynasty (960-1127).²⁶ In 1949, the CCP abolished the *Baojia Zhi* and created a municipal (urban) district power structure in cities. Different cities adopted at least three types of grassroots administration that existed under district governments: 1) “street-level government” [*jiedao renmin zhengfu*] such as in Wuhan and Dalian; 2) “street office” [*jiedao banshichu*] which was sued as the urban district government’s dispatch agent in Shanghai and Tianjin; and 3) “civil affairs unit” [*minzheng zu*] that was set up in local police stations with no additional administrative units being set up under the district government as was the situation in Beijing and Chongqing. There was a power vacuum between the state apparatus and the huge numbers of essentially unorganized urban residents in all of these three types of urban governing structures. To effectively organize and govern urban residents, many forms of grassroots self-governing institutions emerged in several cities with diverse names, compositions, and functions.

It is often claimed that the first Residents Committee was established in Tianjin City or in Wuhan City in March 1950 (Ling and Jiang, 2001). However, the latest archives reveal that the first one was established as early as December 1949

²⁶ In the *Baojia Zhi*, roughly ten households are compiled into one *Jia* and ten *Jia* into one *Bao*. The basic idea is that individual households are mutual responsible for each other's behavior and local security (see Ch`ü, 1962).

when Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province promulgated an administrative order, “An Order to Abolish *Baojia Zhi* and Establish Residents Committees” [*guanyu quxiao baojia zhidu jiangli jumin weiyuanhui de zhishi*] (Zhao, 1998, p. 531). The Order stated that urban grassroots management should be organized according to the principle of self-governance. The Residents Committee was not part of the state apparatus but instead was intended to be a self-governing institution elected by local residents. It was responsible for: 1) representing urban residents, publicizing governmental laws and orders, and strengthening connection between local governments and residents; 2) assisting governments in urban management and construction; and 3) managing grassroots affairs. It is by far the earliest government order on record regarding the establishment of the Residents Committee. By March 1950, Hangzhou had established 571 Residents Committees and 3,802 “residential teams” [*jumin xiaozu*].²⁷

On June 8, 1952, Peng Zhen, one of the most vocal and enthusiastic promoters in the CCP’s senior leadership of local self-governance and the rule of law, submitted a report to the CCP Politburo, “A Report on Street Office, Urban Residential Committees, and the Problems of Financial Outlays” [*guanyu chengshi jiedao banshichu, jumin weiyuanhui zuzhi he jingfei wenti de baogao*].²⁸ In his report, Peng (1990), the then deputy director of the CCP Central Committee’s Political-Legal Committee and the mayor of Beijing City, discussed the self-governing nature of the

²⁷ A residential team usually consisted of ten to fifteen households, working under a Residents Committee.

²⁸ Peng Zhen has profound influence on grassroots self-governance and the rule of law in China. All later laws and regulations regarding both the Residents Committee and the Villagers Committee could find the imprints of his report in 1953.

Residents Committee. Peng defined the committees as mass autonomous organizations, not political (i.e., governmental) organizations.

The committee's main goal was to organize those urban residents not encompassed by work units (such as in the factory, school, government, and military), improve their public welfare, popularize government policies and laws, mobilize participation in state-sponsored activities, and represent their interests. Members of the committee should be elected by residential teams and accept the guidance of local governments. Since the committee was not part of any administrative organization, local governments should not delegate extra burdens to it (Peng, 1990). The CCP Politburo later ratified this report. At the end of 1952, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) issued two bylaws promoting the committee nationwide: "the Transitory Organic Bylaw of Security and Safeguard Committees" [*zhian baowei weiyuanhui*] and "the Transitory Organic Bylaw of People's Mediation Committees" [*renmin tiaojie weiyuanhui*].

In 1954, MIA issued an administrative order, "A Notice to Establish Street Office and Residents Committees" [*guanyu jianshe jiedao banshichu he jumin weiyuanhui zuzhi de tongzhi*]. In that same year, the Standing Committee of the NPC passed the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees, which finalized the committee's legal status as the urban grassroots self-governing institution. By 1956, the committee had been widely established in most cities.

The Period of Setback: 1957 – 1965

During the Great Leap Forward (1957-1959), the starvation (1960-1962), and

the following adjustment period (1963-1965), the Residents Committee suffered significant setbacks. In the waves of nationalization, collectivization, and communization, the committee was forced to merge with street offices in many cities and become semi-state institutions.

During the founding period, the committee often participated in non-political activities, such as public security and order (dispute and minor criminal justice resolution), social welfare and disaster relief, social mobilization and donation, management over vagrants and prostitutes, and illiteracy elimination. However, the committee began being involved in a series of political movements, and was gradually politicized after about the year 1957. For example, some committees changed their subordinate dispute resolution committees to penalty committees, whose main responsibility was changed from mediating civil disputes and minor criminal justices to punishing, controlling, and reforming “criminals,” most of whom were politically “dissent elements” [*huai fenzi*]. The trend of merging the committees with street offices was temporarily stopped in 1963 as the CCP re-decentralized its power structure. Even though it temporarily insulated the actions of the committee from the infringement of the state, its operations had been significantly politicized during this period.

The Period of Total Reverse: 1966 – 1976

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution quickly swept through China and all levels of administration were “revolutionized” by various “Revolution Committees” [*geming weiyuanhui*]. These Revolution Committees joined party and administrative systems

together again, extending the state's will down into every level of society. The committee did not escape from this "revolutionary" storm. In the first two years of the Cultural Revolution, many urban districts adopted militarily organized systems which created a three-tiered quasi-military hierarchy under street offices: "company" [*lian*], "platoon" [*pai*], and "squad" [*ban*], all of which were strictly political instruments. Since the responsibilities and functions of the company and the Residents Committee overlapped, many committees were actually taken over by company. They were renamed as "the Revolutionary Residents Committees" [*geming jumin weiyuanhui*] and lost their nominal independence and became "legs" of the state politics. The internal structure of the Residents Committee was also altered to carry out political duties such as political mobilization, political surveillance, and ideological education. Those sub-committees once responsible for civil affairs, such as social service committees and dispute resolution committees, were substituted with politically oriented committees such as "learning groups" [*xuexi xiaozu*] and "mass dictating groups" [*qunzhong dangzheng xiaozu*].

The Residents Committee's politicization completely distorted its non-political status. Because of its familiarity with residential affairs, the committee was put at the frontlines of political control. As a result, great tensions rose between the committee and its constituents (White, 1971). The negative reputation of the committee and the bitterness it created in the Cultural Revolution produced long-lasting distrust from local residents (Zhang, 1990). The image that the committee was part of the state apparatus persists even today, which has greatly impeded its ability to

expand in the post reform era.

The Period of Expansion: 1976 – Present

The Cultural Revolution was a disaster for the committee since it profoundly politicized the committee and even abolished it in many cities. Right after the end of the Revolution, some cities started re-activating the committee's civil functions so as to handle the urban grassroots chaos that had erupted. In 1979, with the support of Peng Zhen, Bo Yibo, and other CCP seniors, the NPC reissued the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees (1954 version). Another fact also signified the beginning of changes in attitude towards the committee. The management of the committee-related affairs was transferred from the Ministry of Public Security to the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 1980.

The 1982 Constitution was a milestone for the committee. For the first time, the institutional nature and responsibility of the committee were ratified in China's fundamental law (Article 111). Based upon the Constitution and the Organic Law (1954), the NPC passed the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees in 1989, which provided many detailed articles that helped the committee to grow. According to that law, the committee meant to be an inherently grassroots democratic institution. For example, in line with the priority of being self-governing entities, the top priority of the committee is to “defend residents’ legal rights and interests” (Article 3, section 1). In addition, all adult residents are entitled to vote and to stand for the committee positions (three years for each term) through direct or indirect election (Article 8). The “residents’ assembly” [*jumin huiyi*], which consists of all adult residents (or

household representatives), oversees the committee's operation, dismisses and replaces its members, and determines what will be important issues (Article 9 and 10). The relationship between the committee and the residents' assembly can be likened to an elected executive committee responsible to its legislative board.

This round of legal recognition was accompanied by significant expansion of the committee in practice. It was actively promoted by all levels of government, especially the central government, as an important way to cope with changes at the urban grassroots level. In 1997, the number of the committees reached 119,000, with almost half a million members (Zhang, 1997). In the same year, the committees created 133,253 residential welfare and service establishments, including 5,113 residential service centers and 307,226 service subdivisions.²⁹ Further, it became involved in grassroots affairs at a much deeper level. Its target population was expanded from former social dissociates to all residents. The committee's responsibilities were also greatly increased. Many committees were burdened with more than one hundred agenda/issue, ranging from birth control, marriage and family, social relief, neighborhood security, donations, collecting fees, to many other areas (Jiang, 2004). Some residents even referred to directors of the committee as "lane premiers" [*xiaoxiang zongli*]. So far, the committee has established complex grassroots networks and a substantial amount of resources, and has become the largest neighborhood institution in urban China.

²⁹ Minzheng nianjian banji zu, *China Yearbook of Civil Affairs* (Beijing: Zhongguo minzheng chubanshe, 1998). Those service subdivisions cover wide ranges of neighborhood issues, such as laundry, barber, and neighborhood reading rooms.

The discussions about the legal status and the history of the Residents Committee demonstrate not only its key position in community affairs, but also the paradoxical nature of this sandwich organization, in that it is at once responsible for channeling state imperatives and residents' self-ruling initiatives. They indicate that a study on this organization needs to borrow from a bunch of well-established theories. This chapter has presented both the theoretical framework and background information, and suggested how to analyze empirical data collected in the field. In line with this analysis of data, the appropriate research method will be discussed in the next chapter.

Research Methodology

Chapter Three

Prologue

Besides learning about the Residents Committee and the grassroots politics related to it, this project also has two broad theoretical ambitions. First, the study of this Chinese version of the neighborhood organization is undertaken so as to explore the broad portrait of the changing grassroots state-society relations in contemporary China. Additionally, such exploration is also epistemologically beneficial in the sense that it allows us to evaluate the intellectual lenses normally employed in this type of investigation, particularly the liberal mantra, which dominates most of the discourse about politics in the non-Western countries like China.

These inquiries are only viable at least when an empirical question of “How” and another of “Why” are adequately addressed. How is the Residents Committee interacting with the state and ordinary residents? Meanwhile, why does it behave in the manner that it is observed to? The first question requests substantive knowledge of the committee’s functionalities. The second question, correlatively, needs to deal with the nuances of contexts and relations that the functionality of the committee resides in.

In accordance, then, with these purposes, this project is designed as a case study, because this methodology is particularly useful for answering the “How” and the “Why” questions inside dense and delicate contexts, like Chinese context. Yin describes the advantage of a case study in the following way:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. In other words, you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions – believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study. ... The case study inquiry copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points (Yin, 1994, p. 13)

There are important questions that surround the use of this methodology, all of which have to be addressed in order to create a robust research design. The immediate question is the generalization of a case study. Specifically, how many cases are needed in order to address the stated concerns in a positivist, substantive way? How are they chosen? What are the criteria for case selection? How can they be accessed? What kinds of tools are used to collect data and information? Finally, what measures are taken to protect the informants in this project?

This chapter is devoted to the above questions about methodology. In general, this project is designed as a comparative case study. Four Residents Committees with diverse characteristics are selected from Tianjin City. Multiple methods were used to obtain access to the fields. Participant observation, interview, and documentation were major tools used for data collection. Protecting the informants was a constant consideration throughout the research. Each of the above statements is discussed below in detail.

Case Selection

Selection of City

This project selected all Residents Committees from a single city, Tianjin City. The practical concern about money and time was a reason that prevented this comparative case study from expanding to more than one city. More importantly, selecting a single city rather than multiple ones follows the logic of the most similar system design, i.e., it seeks to maximize common characteristics and to minimize different ones that would be due to the differences across cities. By doing so, the intersystemic city differences are minimized so that the Residents Committees can be explained by the similarities and differences across them. In this project, common systemic characteristics are controlled for whereas the systemic differences between the committees can be labeled explanatory factors.

Tianjin City is located by the Yellow Sea (Figure 3-1). It is the biggest city in northern coastal China, with a permanent population of more than ten million people. It is also one of the four cities that are directly administered by the central government.³⁰

Tianjin City has been going through a period of tremendous transition in the reform era. Demographically, its population increased by almost thirty percent between 1978 and 2002.³¹ During the same period, the number of households increased by seventy-four percent but the average size of the households decreased by twenty-seven percent. Tianjin City is also one of the most economically advanced cities in China.

³⁰ The other three cities are: Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing. They are officially equivalent to the provincial governments.

³¹ The data in this paragraph come from *Tianjin Statistical Yearbook 2003*.

With 0.7 percent of China's population being located inside and immediately around it, Tianjin City accounted for two percent of China's GDP in 2002. Its GDP was 205 billion *yuan* in 2002—roughly twenty-five times more than in 1978.



Figure 3-1: The Location of Tianjin City in China

Besides expansion of its economic volume, the structure of employment in Tianjin City was significantly diversified. In 1978, nearly all urban employees worked for either state-owned or collective-owned units. By 2002, nearly fifty-six percent of them worked in private, foreign, or individual units. The urbanization of the city was also accompanied by a rapid increase of personal wealth. Per capita annual disposable income in 2002 was 230 times higher than in 1978. Tianjin's infrastructure has also been radically expanded and updated. For example, both the total floor space of

buildings and the per capita living space of residential buildings have increased nearly five times and three times, respectively, between 1978 and 2002. In addition, the community service establishments of Tianjin City have doubled in number between 1995 and 2000 from 4,038 to 8,923. However, like the rest of China, Tianjin City also faces growing challenges regarding urban governance, such as urban unemployment and floating population.

Table 3-1: Changes of Residential Population in Tianjin City (1987-2002)³²

	Permanent population (10,000 person)	Registered population (10,000 person)	Percentage of registered floating population over permanent population (%)
1987	832	829	0.37
1988	843	839	0.50
1989	857	852	0.54
1990	884	866	2.05
1991	909	873	4.16
1992	920	879	4.71
1993	928	886	4.76
1994	935	891	5.02
1995	942	895	5.27
1996	948	898	5.54
1997	953	900	5.87
1998	957	905	5.70
1999	959	910	5.42
2000	1001	912	9.77
2001	1004	914	9.86
2002	1007	919	9.59

Sources: *Tianjin Statistical Yearbook* (1988-2003)

Table 1-3 has shown that the official unemployment rate in Tianjin City skyrocketed from 0.37 percent in 1996 to 14.30 percent in 2002. Table 3-1 lists the changes that the floating population of Tianjin City has undergone between 1987 and

³² *Tianjin Statistical Yearbook* started publishing the permanent population in 1987.

2002. As the table shows, nearly all residents were under the effective control of the state in 1987 as they were registered in the official household registration system. However, about one of ten Tianjiners became “rootless” in 2002, and this number does not include the great number of temporary residents who were not registered in the state’s household registration system in the first place.

The challenges discussed above only reveal the tip of the iceberg of social and economic problems that threatens to submarine the progress of the city in the coming years. As with any other city in China, Tianjin City is experiencing profound change as prosperity and crises are emerging side by side. And although this period of change involves the potential for failures of governance and for the political fallout that comes with the deepening of urban social ills, it also provides a useful context for exploring the changing state-society relationship at the urban grassroots level. As Tianjin City is a rapidly growing city with more than one thousand urban communities, one can find various types of communities existing inside of it. Communities ranging from those that have been newly modernized to those that are blighted and can barely survive can be found and observed as individual yet interconnected parts of its urban web. In addition, Tianjin City is one of the twelve cities chosen by the Ministry of Civil Affairs as “experimental cities for neighborhood governance and community reforms” of 1999 (Tang, 2000, p. 262). It means that any successful experience had by Tianjin City would be introduced to other Chinese cities in the future. That has been the common strategy in the reform era. Hexi District in Tianjin City was listed as one of the first twenty-six districts nationwide in 1999 that participated in the Residents Committee reforms,

reforms which involved such things as greater fiscal assistance from local governments and direct election. Therefore, Tianjin City can provide not only examples of regular types of the Residents Committees—such as are found in most cities—but also the reforming types that serve as “pilots” for future, more broad-scale nationwide application.

In addition, it is conceivable that the diversity and sheer number of the Residents Committees in metropolitan areas like Tianjin City can be a pretty good representative sample of most types of committees that would be found in small and medium cities. This is especially likely to be true given the highly unitary system of governance found in China. As Read (2003) has found during his visits to several Chinese cities,

Residents Committees in the medium and large-sized municipalities in the different parts of the country that I looked at displayed considerable consistency. While specific details of Residents Committee organization and practices vary somewhat, these institutions are governed by the same law, have similar core duties, and are in many respects minor variations on the same theme (p. 47).

The biggest difference across cities, as Read finds, is the varying fiscal capacity of various cities that supports the committees. It is often true that big cities have more fiscal resources than smaller ones with which they can support their committees (Read, 2003, p. 47). However, this particular city-level contrast can somewhat be reduced when intra-city comparisons are made. One can easily find committees of blighted and affluent neighborhoods that match each other in terms of available fiscal resources (and in terms of operational dynamics and functionality) in Tianjin City. There are plenty of committees and communities in Tianjin City that probably to a large extent provide representative samples of just about all kinds of urban communities and committees that

are found elsewhere in China; and thus they represent materials for effective comparison that would reasonably mimic comparisons made of any disparities between cities.

To what extent are the findings from Tianjin City applicable to other Chinese cities? The concern is plausible that the findings in Tianjin City would not account for the cross-city differences. This concern should remind readers not to overstretch the findings of this project without considering the fact of the particularity methodologically involved in the city selection in this project. And for that matter, they must always be generally conscious of the importance of constructing a representative sample in such case-study investigations as this one. But the real value of this project does not rest in surveying the geographic diversity of the Residents Committees across China. Indeed, the knowledge found in the experience of Tianjin City can provide not only substantive guidance for future across-city studies, but also it can provide a useful body of information to be tested against the experiences in other cities. Therefore, it would be instructive to expand the Residents Committee study from a single city to multiple cities in future studies.

Selection of the Residents Committees

Tianjin City has 1,115 Residents Committees in its six urban districts. Again, the challenge was not to find an exact match between my sample and the 1,115 committees. Instead, I attempted to identify several committees that can maximize the possibility of learning about the changing state-society relations at the urban grassroots level in Tianjin City.

How many cases are enough for the project? This is an empirical question; the answer of which is not only defined by issues of time and resources, but also by the goal of the research. There is a clear trade-off between the deep knowledge that can be gained from a few cases, and the generalizations that can come as a result of more superficially investigating a multitude of cases. Since the literature tells little about the contemporary Residents Committee, I decided to choose the deeper exploration rather than a more general approach. In this project, I accordingly chose to study four Residents Committees.

Like any other small-N study, this project attempts explanation of some of the issues involved based upon information gained from a relatively small sample. However, it does not mean that this project has to sacrifice too much as far as its ability to generalize. A well-designed sampling strategy can still maximize the diversity found between the four committees while still keeping the focus on the research question posted in the project. In order to accomplish this goal, I employ a mixed sampling strategy: a combination of purposeful targeting and partial random selection.

The foundation of my case selection effort was to create a “purposeful rather than random” sample (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 36). Instead of rolling dice, I established some criteria to locate the four Residents Committees that were appropriate for this project. The first criterion was adopted from the official standard used by the Ministry of Civil Affairs to distinguish between the committees. The Ministry categorizes the committees nationwide into three groups: those established in a traditional urban neighborhood where housing property is publicly owned; those

established in a modern neighborhood where housing property is privately owned; and those in a neighborhood with a mixed property ownership.

The next second is the size of the community, including the number of households and residents. The third criterion is the location, which includes three sets of factors: (1) downtown vs. mid-city vs. outskirts, (2) urban districts, and (3) street location. The final criterion is the history of the committees, i.e., when were they established? These three criteria cover the major distinctions among the committees in China, if the inter-city factors are excluded.

Certainly, given the large total number of the committees in Tianjin City, the above criteria could not necessarily help me precisely pinpoint the four most appropriate cases for this project. Hence, the process of final selection involved more than what has been detailed so far. As mentioned earlier, ultimately I adopted a multi-stage strategy for locating the four cases.

The first stage contributes two committees before I entered the field: the Huashan Residents Committee and the Jingtai Residents Committee. I began the search according to the guidance of my in-country Chinese research partner, Professor Tang Zhongxin.³³ He kindly agreed to offer me logistical support while I was in Tianjin City. Before I went to the field, we worked out a plan to locate the committees. Per my request, Professor Tang prepared two pools of the committees for me to choose. The first pool included seventeen modernized urban communities that were composed of

³³ Professor Tang Zhongxin, who teaches urban affairs in Tianjin Social Science Academy and Nankai University, is a leading scholar in the area of the Residents Committee in China. He is also one of six senior research fellows in the Ministry of Civil Affairs to make policy recommendations regarding the reform of the committee. He has read my proposal and given me many useful suggestions on how to make my project both meaningful in Chinese context and doable in a timely manner.

only privately-owned property, and the second was made up of twenty traditional urban communities that were primarily communities with publicly-owned property. The candidate committees spread in different districts and streets across Tianjin City. From each pool, I randomly picked one as my initial stage of field site.

This is only a partial randomization, since the two candidate pools were relatively small. However, I believe that this measure was helpful in at least two respects. By increasing the diversity of the committees, this partial randomization reduces the concerns about the issue of generalization inherited in any case study. It is difficult to include all qualified candidates in selection pools, due to limits of resources. Additionally, all qualified candidates were not equally accessible. At the beginning stage of my research, I could only realistically rely upon those committees where I could use Professor Tang's connection. Finally, the partial randomization involved with my selecting from the two pools gave me the discretion over the final selection, reducing the potential bias that would have been involved if Professor Tang simply would have pinpointed two committees for me.

The second stage involved choosing the third committee after two months of study in the field. Based on the experience I had on the ground, I chose the Shiyan Residents Committee as my third case on my own. It is a community with a mixed property ownership. More importantly, it is one of the two committees experimenting with direct election in Tianjin City in 2003.

Finally, I selected the Dejia Residents Committee as the fourth case in the third stage of my research. As in the second stage, I alone was responsible for the selection of

the site. Both the Deji and Shiyan Residents Committees belong to the Pudong Street Office, which has a total of fourteen Residents Committees. Again, I randomly picked out the Deji Residents Committee from the rest thirteen committees excluding the Shiyan Residents Committee. The Deji Residents Committee is very similar to the Shiyan Residents Committee in composition of residents, history, and location. But they are different with regard to at least one key element: the Deji Residents Committee was not generated through direct election. This makes the potential comparisons that can be made between the Deji Residents Committee and the Shiyan Residents Committee more analytically substantive.

Table 3-2 summarizes the characteristics of the four Residents Committees. However, the diversity in the table is obviously by no means comprehensive enough to be representative of the 1,115 committees in Tianjin City. Acknowledging this fact can once again remind the reader of the limits of the project in terms of its generalization, but the criteria used in this project can still represent major distinctions that can be made between most Residents Committees in China. This insures that the basic diversity of characteristics present between the four chosen committees have some value, and thus gives value as well as this project.

Table 3-2: Selection of the Four Residents Committees

	Jingtai	Huashan	Dejia	Shiyan
Types of housing property	Private ownership	Public ownership	Mixed ownership	Mixed ownership
Number of households	680 ³⁴	2213	1578	1100
Number of residents	2800	5923	4480	3511
Location 1: geography	Downtown	Suburb	Mid-city	Mid-city
Location 2: District	Heping	Hebei	Hexi	Hexi
Location 3: Street	Weifang	Meiyuan	Pudong	Pudong
History	2002 (2000)	1985 (1983) ³⁵	1950s ³⁶	1952
Partial randomization	Yes (1/17)	Yes (1/20)	Yes (1/13)	No

Note: the actual names of the Residents Committees and their communities have been replaced with arbitrarily chosen place names from elsewhere in China.

³⁴ The numbers of household and resident in the Jingtai Square Community are questionable, since the Residents Committee there does not keep accurate information.

³⁵ The year in the parenthesis is the date when the community was built.

³⁶ The exact year is not recorded. The former committee members told me that it was in the 1950s.

Getting Access to the Sites

Once the sites were selected, the next challenge involved the issue of access. Unlike the civic organizations in the liberal democracies, the Residents Committee is often problematic in term of its openness to outsiders. Although it is not as exclusive as some governmental agencies with national secrecy or political sensitivity, it is by no means an open organization. Often a committee is like a mega database in which one can find all kinds of information regarding its residents. It functions like a nerve center, containing astonishingly detailed private information about its residents, such as name, birthday, marital status, occupation, income, family composition, political affiliation, ID number, medical history; sometimes the committees even have information about the methods of contraception residents use. None of them makes the committee comfortable with being easily open to any outsider. In order to fully access the sites, I had to employ multiple strategies.

Formal Access

The first strategy was to present myself as an insider rather than an outsider as much as possible. Being a student only would not be treated as an insider. Fortunately, Professor Tang allowed me to participate in his research project as a research collaborator. His project aimed to learn about the problems in community governance and to give policy suggestions. It was a governmental project funded by the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Tianjin City. That basically meant that all street offices were required full cooperation, should their Residents Committees be chosen for investigation.

Being a collaborator with Professor Tang in his project gave me entree, allowing me to enter the chosen site as an insider rather than a strange outsider. I accessed the Huashan Residents Committee in this way. Professor Tang informed the Meiyuan Street Office two days before my arrival. Then, he, one officer from the Bureau of Civil Affairs, and one from the Meiyuan Street Office accompanied me to the Huashan Residents Committee on my the first day there and introduced me as a research collaborator for the governmental project.

This is an access method relies on the existing top-down administrative hierarchy. Approval from the higher-ups gave me free access to the complete dossier of the committee. The committee members were also quite cooperative while I was there. Seeking a legitimate identity in the formal hierarchy is perhaps the most effective way to gain full access to the site with the least amount of hassle and resistance in contemporary China.

The question remains, though, of how much I was truly accepted by the committee members, despite their formal welcome. Would they tell me the truth or simply constrain themselves from presenting their honest viewpoints, due to my “official” identity? Could I trust what they told me? With minor reservations, I believe that they engaged me under most circumstances in open and honest way for several reasons.

First, my mission there was academic in nature, which involved little conflict with committee members. Indeed, I intentionally emphasized my academic interest,

which was so remote to their immediate concerns that no one seemed interested in my project. As a result, they either treated my mission positively or with indifference.

Second, I tried blurring my identification as an official researcher once I entered the committee. Instead, I took pains to build personal trust with each of the members to the best of my capacity. The trust-building process will be discussed further below. For most of the time I felt that they regarded me as an intern or co-worker rather than as a researcher.

Two examples show how little attention they paid to my “official” identity. First, they often complained to me of with the Meiyuan Street Office in surprisingly critical language, or they joked about the street officers by telling rumors and tales. Second, I did not notice significant behavior changes during my four-week stay there. Those who constantly came in late and left early behaved the same throughout the time when I was there, and so did those who were known for treating residents harshly.

However, I did also encounter a few moments when members of the committee were cautious about my identity. For example, when I conducted one-on-one interviews, two members asked me whether I would report the transcripts to the street office. Although I assured them that there was zero possibility of that, they apparently still had doubts. As a result, they requested not to tape-record our conversations. In the other case, the director of the committee, Mr. Cao Hui, regularly asked about the progress of my research and about my impression of the performance of his committee. Besides his desire to receive suggestions to improve his work, I could sense his concern about what I saw and wrote down.

Theoretically, my “official” identity might have caused a situation where the “public transcript” was dramatically different from the “private transcript” (Scott, 1990), although I believed that was not the case in the Huashan Residents Committee. As a matter of caution, however, I decided to use different means for accessing the remaining three committees.

Informal Access

Professor Tang had established strong ties with many local governments as well as the Residents Committees, particularly those in Tianjin City where he spent most of his teaching and research time.³⁷ This informal network enabled him to conduct several large surveys without relying on the government authorities for permission. My access to the Jingtai Residents Committee and the Shiyan Residents Committee benefited from the informal network that he had established. In both committees, the directors had attended Professor Tang’s lectures. Therefore, when he introduced me to both committees as his research collaborator, both committees accepted me happily, as would be expected.

Unlike being treated as an official investigator in the Huashan Residents Committee, my role in those two committees was one of a purely academic researcher conducting a private project. Largely due to the influence of Professor Tang, I received decent cooperation from most committee members. At those two sites, I did not worry

³⁷ Professor Tang is a senior sociologist and the director of the Institute of Sociology in Tianjin Academy of Social Science. He also serves as an adjunct professor teaching community development at Nankai University, one of the top universities in China. Due to his reputation in the field, many local governments across China have invited him to deliver lectures and train their government employees and directors of the Residents Committee.

that my subjects behaved differently because of my presence. In addition, the informal status I had also made it easier for me to establish trust.

Finally, rather than totally relying on Professor Tang, I developed my own ways to access the last committee, the Deji Residents Committee. While I was doing research on the first three committees, I noticed that an individual committee was not an isolated organization, but rather maintained networks with other committees to varying degrees. Members from different committees knew each other because they had many opportunities to work together across neighborhoods. This is particularly true among the committees that are under the authority of the same street office. Through fostering good relations with one committee, one could actually open the door to relationships with numbers other committees.

Since I found some distinctive patterns of functionality in the Shiyan Residents Committee, I decided to select the Deji Residents Committee for the sake of comparison. As I discussed before, both have many similarities, so they make perfect subjects for my “most similar comparative case” design. Since both committees were located on the same street, I got access to the Deji Residents Committee because of an introduction I received from the director of the Shiyan Residents Committee, Grandpa Zhao Fu.

Access through acquaintances is a commonly used strategy in field research, especially for the sites that do not particularly welcome unknown “strangers,” and this is true for the field of the Residents Committee as well. The decades of trust between the two committees greatly reduced the possible suspicion that anyone may have had of

my first arrival at the Deji Residents Committee. Indeed, my research activity there was well received, as essentially it was in the other three committees as well.

Building Trust

Once I entered the sites, the challenge was to maximize what I could gain from my stay there. China is a society built upon intense human relations [*renshi guanxi*]. This is partially due to the fact of its dense population, but it is also because of the Confucian cultural heritage the country has, as well. Like it or not, I needed to cultivate a favorable microenvironment around myself. So what this meant for me in practice—as far as the research was concerned—was that my existence there added a burden to the committees. To some extent, my request for cooperation would take time when they were occupied by various other everyday tasks of management and problem solving. So in the interest of visibly and tangibly appreciating their sacrifice, I spent a lot of effort trying to establish good relations with them based upon trust and cooperation.

Building trust not only made my research easier, it also became an integral part of my findings. Through the trust building process, I was able to learn some deep and subtle facts that I otherwise would have missed or not heard about the committees and their members; facts which the members would not have initially released or been up front about had I not tried as hard as I did to develop their trust. I used several approaches in attempting achieve this goal.

The first and the simplest way I could development trust between us was to appreciate their jobs. As the story in the Huashan Residents Committee in Chapter Two indicates, most committee members I talked with were sensitive to people's conception

of their work. And my showing respect as such was not just me paying lip service to an ideal. Rather it very much sprung from the fact that I truly do have an appreciation for the difficult position that these people are in, with their imperatives being as split between the state and the people the way that they are, and with how under-resourced they often are as well. My experience there also enabled me to develop an even deeper respect for them than that I had when I went in. From the first, I have always acknowledged in theory that the committee members were sandwiched between two powerfully demanding (and often conflicted) priorities. After I was finished with my research, my acknowledgement became visceral, having been developed and conditioned from what I witnessed face-to-face.

Secondly, I tried to actively involve myself in their daily operations. Those committees were usually very busy, which provided me with good opportunities to help as well as to learn by doing. Because of my willingness to help, all the committees treated me more like a fellow worker than an outside researcher. I was often asked to substitute for short vacancies or offer a hand to those members that were overloaded. In most cases I was glad to help, and greatly benefited from it besides.

Besides being a helping hand in workplace, I also helped some committee members with their personal issues. For example, I fixed a computer for Ms. Li Lan, the director of the DeJia Residents Committee. I made it so that she now can talk to her son (who is studying in Japan) through MSN Instant Messenger for an unlimited time with no cost. Before that, she could only hear her son's voice every one or two months. That single act won not only her full support for my project, but also cooperation from other

committee members as they saw their boss's attitude. Additionally, I taught a committee member's middle school daughter about my methods of learning English and mathematics. One committee member even asked me to write a sample essay so that her son could memorize it in for his coming preliminary school graduation test.

Finally, I also attempted to establish trust in some non-traditional ways. For example, I constantly responded to the requests for donations organized by the committees.³⁸ Sometimes I took individual committee members out for lunches or dinners, during which I conducted interviews or simply had casual talks with them. In order to break the ice, I also invited all members of the Huashan Committee, the directors from the Meiyuan Street Office, and the vice director of the Hebei District Bureau of Civil Affairs to a big dinner on the first day I was introduced to the committee. The feeling of strangeness quickly melted away at dining table.

Through all of these various ways, I established what appeared to be very sound relationships of trust with all the Residents Committees I visited. As a result, my requests for cooperation that involved everything from arranging interviews to requesting permission to review documents were well served. There are really quite a few things that illustrated the sort of relationship that I was fortunate enough to have established and to have been a part of. In each committee, I was given the keys to the committee office so that I could read documents after the working hours were over. I was also allowed to bring most of their documents home to copy, although I only used this option when absolutely necessary. While I was in Tianjin City, three committee

³⁸ All donations were voluntary, usually costing very little. I participated in two donations, one called "Mother in Poverty" and the other "Hope Project" to support rural girls who cannot afford schooling.

directors invited me to their homes for family dinners. I even encountered situations when two committee social workers (former committee members) began crying during my interviews with them.

Ethical Issues with Trust

Trusting relationships greatly facilitated my field research. However, they also posed a more dilemma for me in a few situations. For example, the Jingtai Residents Committee members asked me from time to time to handle their duties while they left for private purposes. I was often left alone to take care of potential circumstances that I was honestly not capable of handling. Even more questionably, whenever residents walked in or phoned in for whatever reasons, I had to cover for the committee members on duty by claiming that they were out on normal business.³⁹ This kind of moral dilemma also occurred when I was asked to help with “cooking” data. In this I believe that I even witnessed some possible instances of fraud or corruption, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

The above all represent classical situations that bring to light the ethical issues involved with doing field research. I established trust for the purpose of finding truth, but certain parts of the trust building process are indeed ethically controversial. The act of serving a big dinner also falls into the grey territory of research ethic, as far as I am concerned. I was able to acquire very specific and sometimes privileged information about the committee because of the trust I was able to establish. However, I ended up having to do something that I would not do under normal circumstance.

³⁹ The committee members were frank with me that they particularly worried that the street office might learn about their absence from work for private purposes.

Although I did not feel comfortable, I finally decided to do what they asked me to do in the Jingtai case for one primary reason: my actions did not cause any irreversible damage to anyone who called or walked in. as a researcher constrained by time and cost, it seems that I also should have committed myself to the finding of truth in the field. The Jingtai Residents Committee represented a unique example of a Chinese grassroots organization, which is academically very important. Anyone facing the same situation in any other committee would do the same thing, if he or she really wanted this issued to be explored.

Methods of Data Collection

After establishing an environment of trust at each of the sites, the data collection became critical. I employed three methods so as to effectively obtain and process information.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a research tool that was used on a daily basis in all four committees. This tool is especially suitable for understanding a particular organization or problem, as opposed to those tools that demonstrate a relationship between abstractly defined variables (Becker, 1958). The contemporary committee has not been vigorously studied and therefore I had few preconceived notions about what kinds of a reality I would find in the field. Participant observation was therefore a key tool which helped me both to process the reality I encountered everyday and also that helped me to refine my research design accordingly, particularly as far as my interview questionnaire and targeting documentation were concerned. However, this does not mean that I entered the field only to observe everything that occurred. Given the analytical structure that I had from the first in my mind, I adopted a method of structured participant observation rather than a grounded approach, i.e., I concentrated on the committee's functions and the relationship between the street office and the residents as it was channeled through the committees.

When an observer creates intense social ties with the subject he or she studies, the data gathered is greatly enriched (Crano and Brewer, 2002, pp. 202-209). Based on the trust I built, I was able to conduct a fully-fledged observation, i.e., I could actively

participate in various operations the committee took on while I was there. For example, as far as the issue of social control is concerned, I attended neighborhood security meetings, joined the security patrol, helped to mediate some of the bickering that took place in the neighborhoods; and I also visited released convicts, pregnant women, and some members of the floating population. I also participated in various community services, such as cleaning, social relief, donation drives, emergency services, and in neighborhood entertainment and athletic events. As far as my involvement in activities related to the neighborhood self-governance are concerned, I helped organize residential residents' assembly semi-annual meetings, contributed thoughts to the drafting process of a neighborhood self-governing covenant, and joined the committee's internal discussions about accountability to residents. Through my intensive participation in the above list of things, I have the opportunity to observe detailed, rich and sometimes even sensitive information in the sites that was related to many of the more contentious issues that currently face the committees. Being something of a quasi-worker also allowed me to taste the real differences among the four committees, as the working experiences were so vividly distinct from each other.

I always kept a notebook at my side and wrote down interesting facts while my observations were ongoing. For those moments where taking notes were inappropriate, such while I was involved in mediating neighborhood disputes or visiting released convicts, I made sure to record it when I got home while my memory was still fresh. I also took some pictures when possible, although the opportunities were few.

Interviews

Depending on the preferences of the interviewees, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, always with the goal in mind of attempting to learn the specifics about each committee. Unlike neighborhood organizations in liberal countries, the committee and its operations are historically closed to external study. Thus, it is entirely possible that people working in the committees and the residents in urban communities might feel uneasy when they are asked to answer questions by outsiders. Given the sensitivity of some questions, such as those involving birth control and household registration management, my interviews were designed in such a way that attempted to make interviewees feel comfortable in telling the truth, or at least feel that they were not required to provide untruthful but politically safe information. For example, all interviews were conducted in private space.⁴⁰ Depending on the subjects' preferences, interviews were variously conducted in residential houses, community cultural centers, committee offices, restaurants, or even outdoor lawns. The interviews were done in a one-on-one format and in a conversational manner. With the consent of the subjects, I recorded conversations, in addition to taking notes. Table 3-3 summarizes the types of interviews conducted in each community.

⁴⁰ That does not include the chats with the residents, which often happened in the committee offices with the presence of other persons.

Table 3-3: Interviews Conducted in the Fields

	Huashan	Jingtai	Dejia	Shiyan
Current committee members	7	3	5	3
Former committee members	1		2	1
Community social workers				6
Street Officers	2	1	4	(4) ⁴¹
Other governmental officers	1		1	1
Ordinary residents	5	3	8	11
Neighborhood activists	2	1	6	6
Other institutions		1	3	2

Interviews done for this project were aimed at collecting information pertaining to three major subjects. Current and former committee members comprised the primary source of information. The interviews with them were semi-structured so that they were flexible enough to allow for the elaboration of ideals and facts, while all of the conversations were confined to the areas what were interest to me. Due to the good personal relationship I enjoyed with most of the subjects, most interviews went well, except for two cases. In the Huashan Residents Committee, two members displayed a sense of hesitation about my “official” background. In the Dejia Residents Committee, my interview with its director, Ms. Li Lan, lasted nearly one week, as it was constantly interrupted by some neighborhood affairs.

In order to understand the state-resident relations, I also interviewed with some government employees. The main focuses as far as these were the director or deputy directors of the three street offices. The deputy chief of the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Tianjin was also interviewed. Additionally, I had intensely detailed conversations with

⁴¹ The street officers interviewed for the Shiyan Residents Committee and Dejia Residents Committee are same, as both committees belong to the Pudong Street.

two junior bureaucrats who were directly responsible for community affairs in the Pudong Street Office.

Finally, ordinary residents and neighborhood activists were also interviewed so as to obtain information on the relations between the Residents Committee and the resident. As far as the interviews were concerned, this part turned out to be most challenging, particularly in the Huashan Residents Committee and the Jingtai Residents Committee. First, my sample of residents was small compared to the population of the communities, due to time constraints I was facing. Second, interviewing residents proved much more difficult than interviewing any other group of subjects, which was out of my expectation. I tried to schedule my interviews in the night when residents returned from work, but this was not productive. Many did not want to spend their off-work time on a project like mine that was largely irrelevant to them. In addition, many residents I visited exhibited a sense of caution and reserve when they were asked to be interviewed. That was perhaps related with the way I arranged these interviews. Since I chose interviewees and arranged interviews without help from the committees, some residents were suspicious of my motives when I contacted them, and thus simply denied my requests. Their attitudes towards a stranger like me were understandable. Interpersonal relations have become increasingly close-knit and intimate amongst the residents; they are afraid of the rampant crimes in the reform era.

I initially intended to interview between ten to fifteen residents in their homes in each community, which proved to be very difficult and time consuming. Instead, I found other ways to partially substitute for the information I was unable to get from that

particular avenue of investigation. For example, I was often able to observe those residents who visited the committee for various reasons. Their interactions with committee members yielded much knowledge that I had hoped to get from interviews. In addition, I tried to chat with them while they were waiting or before leaving. That strategy was indeed productive, probably because their suspicion towards me as a stranger was reduced somewhat inside the office of the committee.

Neighborhood activists contributed another important source of information to my research. They are a special group of residents who often serve as a link between the committee and ordinary residents. The committees rely heavily upon these activists to perform diverse community functions. And at the same time, these activists maintain intimate relations with individual residents, most of whom are their next-door neighbors or are people living in the same building as them. Therefore these activists possess a detailed knowledge of neighborhood politics. In addition, as a special group of residents, the activists and their various relationships to the committees were germane to this project.

Besides residents, I also interviewed at several institutions that exist inside the communities, including three property management companies, the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association of Tianjin (YMCA), a hotel, and a Chinese opera troupe. These institutions have no formal ties to the committee, but they are important because their existence in the community significantly affects the ways that issues arise between the residents and the committees.

Documentation

The third instrument that I employed in data collection was documentation. Since the information generated from interviews and participant observation always included subjective judgment and interpretation, the documentation I gathered from the archives will complement the conclusion drawn in this project with hard evidence and objectivity. Indeed, the documentation that I gathered for this project came primarily from these archives, and was rather more detailed than I originally expected to find.

Initially, I doubted the possibility of even obtaining valuable documents from these committees. I even doubted that there were any, given what I had heard about how disorganized the Residents Committee were. However, all throughout the process of my field research I was amazed by the quality and quantity of archives that are maintained by the four committees, particularly since the mid-1990s. The Huashan Residents Committee even kept a good archive of documents that went back as far as 1985—the year that the committee was established. It was clear that most committees spent a fair amount of time handling various documents and that they kept them in a rather decent order. The archives turned out to be wonderful resources from which I was able to learn much about both the current functions and the historical evolution of the four committees.

I also relied on governmental documents for information. I was able to access these documents at the street office and various civil affairs bureaus and they included

regulations, policies, and research reports. None of them were classified as “national secret,” “internal documents,” or “internal circulation.”⁴²

⁴² Those classified documents are restricted in access and citation without legal permission.

Informant Protection

The general risk the informants who participated in my project faced regarding their liability for revealing their thoughts and opinions was very low. However, they might have encountered some potential risks in extreme cases when a few touchy issues regarding social control were discussed, although it is highly unlikely that these potential risks could ever become reality as a result of my project.

All informants participated in my study on a voluntary basis. However, it is my responsibility to take measures so as to prevent the worst from happening, not merely in order to fulfill the general ethical requirements involved with research, but also because of my moral obligation to those informants who were kind and forthcoming enough to support my study in the first place. There are several measures that I have taken to achieve this goal.

First, I have used pseudonyms throughout the entire research process. The participants' names, institutions that they are affiliated with, and addresses are replaced with different names that would be commonly used in a Chinese context. This protection strategy has been employed throughout the entire research process, including in data collection, data analysis, dissertation writing, project presentation, and final publication.

Second, throughout my writing process, I have paid close attention to each context for where sensitive information may be revealed about any of the informants. Throughout the project and throughout every stage of the research I have conducted, I have constantly considered changing the context if necessary so as to detach informants

from any information they revealed that would connect their potentially sensitive comments to their names, institutions of affiliation, or neighborhoods.

Third, I alone maintain the interview notes and other collected documents, and I have not and will not transmit them through e-mail, fax, or telephone.

Finally, I only use public data throughout this project so that no extra risks will be transferred to the participants of the research. The public data is not necessarily derived from the records of the Residents Committee, but it is nevertheless relevant to each of the organizations and to the committee in general. It includes sources that are open to the public, such as laws, newspapers, articles, books, and government regulations and policies.

The Statutory Functions of the Residents Committees

Four Cases Compared

Chapter Four

Prologue

This chapter begins the main empirical analysis segment of this project. The main goal of this chapter is to understand the functions of the four Residents Committees, which is the first part of the research question raised in this project. It also establishes the empirical basis for exploring neighborhood politics as they relate to the committee, which eventually leads this project into tentatively inferring the broad grassroots state-society relations in contemporary China.

The Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees requires the committee to play three types of functions simultaneously: social control, service provision, and grassroots self-governance. As a result, the committee is in a delicate position where it must attempt to strike a balance between the prerogatives of the state and those of ordinary residents. In the pre-reform totalitarian system, the committee tended towards offering only unilateral solutions to problems, and thus qualified itself as being only a penetrative instrument of the state. However, in 1978 China turned the page of history. Its totalitarian politics have since evolved into a politics of political authoritarianism and its planned economy has been replaced by one largely based on the principles of a free market. The impacts of this macro transformation have been pervasive in Chinese society, and have trickled down all the way to the urban grassroots as well. As the

leading neighborhood organization, the committee has had to adjust itself so as to accommodate the powerfully social and economic forces that have been pressing down from above and vibrating up from below. This adjustment can come into effect vis-à-vis the committee only insofar that its functionality changes accordingly. How are its three statutory functions carried out today? This question is meaningful because in answering it we learn about the ways that the transformation of the committee has occurred, and we are also able to understand better the nature of the contemporary Chinese state-society relations at the urban grassroots level.

The chapter addresses the question by comparing the four committees, Jingtai, Huashan, Dejia, and Shiyan. The statutory functions that apply to each committee are delineated. Social control is the major topic that is discussed with regard to the Jingtai Residents Committee. In the Huashan Residents Committee, the focus is on its active engagement in the neighborhood economy as well as on its functions related to social control. As for the Dejia and Shiyan Residents Committees with comprehensive functions, the emphasis is on the characteristics that define each committee best. The former devotes itself to service provision while the latter has moved further towards grassroots self-governance. The chapter is divided up by cases rather than functions so as to provide a holistic picture of each committee. Functional comparisons are inserted into the discussion as the case study moves along. Based upon the functions observed, each committee is also compared to the dimensions of the four analytical models discussed earlier.

Jingtai – A Penetrative Residents Committee

The Jingtai Community is located in downtown Tianjin. It is relatively small with only four fourteen-floored high-rising buildings and eight six-floored buildings. The housing property of the community is privately-owned, the price tags of which range from half a million to three million *yuan* (RMB). Since the community was built in 2000, the Huaxia Property Management Company (HPMC) has provided comprehensive services to Jingtai residents from 24-hours security attention to daily property maintenance.

The community is a showcase of the upward mobility experienced by certain Chinese citizens and communities during the waves of economic liberalization. People living in the community belong to the elite in Tianjin City. Even though they constitute only a tiny portion of Tianjiners, they are an important and unique slice of the urban population that has arisen in the reform era. What occurs in the community is integral for understanding the broad picture of grassroots transformation in China.

Jingtai Residents Committee

The committee itself has three female committee members. Its director, Ms. Gong Pei, is a state employee from the Weifang Street Office. It is very common for the street offices to send down public officials to lead the Residents Committees in China. The primary goal is to “manage the Residents Committees and make certain that they accurately execute the governmental policies and better serve their residents.”⁴³ Ms. Gong Pei has a college degree, which is rare among those who work in the Residents

⁴³ Interview with Mr. Li Tie, the director of the Weifang Street Office.

Committees. The other two members are not state officials. Before they joined the committee, Ms. Hu Xiaoyan retired from a steel factory and Ms. Han Xue was a unemployed textile worker.

The committee is unusual in many ways. It was created only recently in 2002, a brand new committee with no historical burden. It is located in one of the most affluent communities in Tianjin City, which provides it with superb business infrastructure that support it. The committee has only three members, the smallest number of any of the four committees I visited. However, the most notable aspect of the committee is its simple functionality. It pays exclusive attention to social control and leaves service provision and neighborhood self-governance largely unattended.

Social Control

Political Dissent. It was May when I was in the Jingtai Community. The months of May and June have been politically sensitive times ever since the student protest of June 1989, the largest political demonstration since the establishment of the PRC. While many Chinese citizens can barely recall the incident fifteen years later, the government is still taking necessary precautions every May and June so as to prevent a similar incident.

The community has three former student protesters, who have become successful businessmen and have purchased their houses in the Jingtai Community. However, they are still closely monitored by the government. This monitoring is facilitated by cooperation between the committee and the local police station. In one morning in May, a police officer paid a special visit to the committee and asked Ms. Hu

Xiaoyan to be extra attentive about the recent activities of those three residents until the end of June. She was told to monitor what they were doing at home or whether they had unusual visitors, etc. She was instructed to report any suspicious activity immediately to the police station. The officer finally reminded Ms. Hu Xiaoyan to be very careful about this business. If the subjects did something politically unacceptable, there would be serious consequences for both the police station and the committee.

The same police officer visited the committee for the same issue again a week later, and called several time to get updates. Ms. Hu Xiaoyan was quite responsive. She paid a home visit to one of the subjects, and called the other two subjects so as to learn their recent activities. In one case, one subject was out of town for business. Ms. Hu Xiaoyan took notes about the location and the purpose of the trip from his family members and quickly reported them to the police. Another surveillance measure she took was to ask building leaders to pay attention to the activities of those three residents.⁴⁴

Falun Gong Practitioners. Since 1990s, *Falun Gong* has led the largest anti-government movement in the recent history of China. As a self-claimed religious network with an independent organizational structure, communications system, and financial base, *Falun Gong* is considered to be the largest single organization that has challenged the Chinese government in the recent decade (Tong, 2002). Since declaring *Falun Gong* as an outlaw manipulative cult in 1999, the government has launched

⁴⁴ Chinese neighborhoods are often divided into several clusters of small groups [*jumin xiaozu*], usually according to their residential proximity. A building leader is usually a resident who serves himself/herself as the Residents Committee's liaison in a cluster.

nationwide campaigns so as to uproot the organization and its influence on society (Thornton, 2002).

On my first visit to the committee, I noticed two new blackboards with cartoons at the entrance to the committee office. One cartoon celebrated the successful launch of a Chinese manned spaceship, the *Shenzhou 5*. Another condemned the evil of *Falun Gong*, which indicated its unusual interest in controlling *Falun Gong* practitioners.

One would not feel surprised to see such cartoons at the peak of anti-*Falun Gong* campaigns between 1999 and 2000. The campaign has gradually waned since then. The timing and placement of this cartoon is interesting, as the committee is the only one that still displays such anti-*Falun Gong* cartoon today. Director Gong Pei offered an explanation for this. The Jingtai Community has several *Falun Gong* practitioners who refuse to give up their beliefs.⁴⁵ The cartoon is a good format to educate those practitioners and the general public. In addition, displaying such a blackboard would be considered an achievement and a thorough step towards the committee efficiently carrying out its social control function by the Weifang Street Office. As I found out later, there were almost no other “shining points” that the committee could claim. The cartoon, then, is a precautionary measure and a small stop that has been taken by the committee so as to—if only in a minor way—execute its social control function. Finally, it is for self-protection. If those practitioners do something bad, the committee at least has something to show that it tried.

⁴⁵ She did not give me the exact numbers. However, I suspect the number would be very small from my conversations with her and other committee members. I also learned that all of the practitioners were seniors.

Besides this propaganda campaign, the committee also serves as the eyes and ears of the local police station over those *Falun Gong* practitioners that live in the neighborhood. The means by which they monitor them adherents are the same as those employed to monitor the above-mentioned political dissidents.

Abnormal Gatherings. The term “abnormal gathering” refers to those relatively large private meetings whose participants are convened for non-family purposes as abnormal gatherings. According to Ms. Gong Pei, those gatherings are not necessarily illegal, but might be potentially harmful in terms of social stability if they were to get out of control. Surveillance over abnormal gatherings in the Jingtai Community is a unique social control endeavor that I was not witness in the other three communities.

There was one case on January 16th when a dozen people—mostly non-residents—went into Room 102 of Building #12 in the Jingtai neighborhood. This immediately aroused the concern of the committee. After two additional gatherings on February 6 and 8 at the same place, the committee reported the activity to the local police. The working diary of the committee shows eight total such gatherings that took place between February and May. For each gathering, the committee wrote down quite specific information, such as time, number of the participants and their demographic composition, some of their activities, and even the ways they came in and left the community. The committee finally found out that the gatherings were not for political purposes, but were simply business meetings about a one-to-one marketing network.

The committee though kept monitoring them closely, as they were requested to by the local police.

The committee also recorded another case on April 18 when more than thirty people joined at the Room 1202 of Building # 10. It turned out to be just a regular party to celebrate the family's son who just returned from France after studying there.

Released Convicts. The member of this particular demographic are generally treated as elements of "instability" because of their past wrongdoings in China. The Residents Committee is usually asked to monitor them for the sake of public safety. There is currently only one released convict living in the Jingtai community, and he currently has a stable job, so apparently the committee has stopped monitoring him regularly, except by way of making a phone call to him every couple of months.

Family Planning (Birth Control) Policy. It has been the national policy to contain overgrowth of population since the mid 1970s. A key reason for the success of the policy is the state's capacity for efficiently and systematically monitoring and influencing the lives of individual citizens. The Residents Committee in general plays important roles to assist the state in this area (Read, 2000). However, the Jingtai Residents Committee in particular had done a very bad job. One simple fact tells all. The committee does not have information about the number of female residents of childbearing age in its community. Without that information, how could it be possible to prevent violations of the policy? As Ms. Han Xue suspected privately, violations of

the policy are probably not unusual in the community.⁴⁶ The committee's bad performance is largely the result of its lax attention to another social control policy/mechanism when it did equally poorly, the household registration system.

Household Registration System. In China, one has to obtain a permit from the state to reside legally in a city. The state created the system in order to control the population flow and to stop illegal residents from migrating to the cities. All urban residents need to register at local police stations. However, the local police—because of their limited resources—often ask the Residents Committees to track the legal status of their residents. This gives the committee a good opportunity to gather, retain, and control basic information about its residents. The household registration system is indeed the information database upon which all information-based efforts of the committee depend. A committee that deals with thousands of residents simply cannot function properly without it.

Such an information system is totally absent in the Jingtai Residents Committee. None of its three members even seemed to know or be able to approximate the exact number of households and residents present in the community. One said 265 and 750, while the other said 680 and 2,800 respectively. There is no way to confirm these numbers without the basic household registration system. This also explains why the committee cannot implement the family planning policy.

⁴⁶ Interview with Ms. Han Xue. According to her, violation of family planning policy is a big challenge for rich communities like the Jingtai. The state usually punishes those violators with heavy fine today, which is effective for peasants and poor urban residents. However rich people like the Jingtai residents are largely not subject to this restraint.

Effectiveness of Social Control. As is the case in most of the rest of the world, the local police station in China often keeps a list of names on hand of residents who, for various reasons, have been marked as potential troublemakers. However, the local police station has many security issues to handle, besides controlling and monitoring the activities of political dissidents. For example, the Weifang Police Station has forty-three officers who are responsible for all the kinds of security-related problems that can arise among 47,514 residents living in the Weifang Street—of which the Jingtai Community is only one part. The police thus have to rely upon neighborhood organizations to conduct the daily surveillance operations. The Jingtai Residents Committee is very active and helpful in this regard.

Certainly, the committee is not a textbook case of a penetrative model in the simple, commonsense definition of the term. It does not break into the homes of targeted residents, interrogate them, employ any coercive means to gain compliance from them, or inflict direct harm on them. However, it does contribute several important elements to the state's chain of political control by monitoring targeted residents, reporting abnormalities, and coordinating with local police. Without its information-gathering input, the local police would not easily be able to put their hands on so many political targets.

However, the committee also displays severe shortfalls in its ability to perform its social control function. Despite its effectiveness in controlling political subjects, the committee fails to implement those control policies that involve large numbers of residents, such as family planning (birth control) policy. It is relatively easy to monitor

a few political targets. However, the committee performs far below the state's expectations in its management of its thousands of residents.

Alienation, Fraud and Suspect Corruption

Alienation. The committee is very isolated from its residents, although it is supposed to be their organization. Most Jingtai residents would be pleased if the committee did not exist at all. A few are indifferent towards its existence, but the majority of residents seem to feel annoyed by the committee. There are structural explanations for the stringent relationship between the residents and the committee, but these will be discussed in the next chapter. However, at the functional level, the committee cannot, or is not willing to, take on additional functions above and beyond the most basic related to social control. For most Jingtai residents, the committee is like a sort of empty shell or straw man, doing nothing to benefit the community.

Fraud. Although the committee offers little in the way of services to its residents, it does carry out some administrative services. Most of those services require it to engage with its residents, which is something that ostensibly the committee is unable or unwilling to do. Under such circumstances, fraud can become rampant. For example, in one case the committee was asked to report the number of children living in the community of ages between 0-7 so as to arrange for immunization shots. This information should come from the household registration system. Since it was missing, the committee simply cooked a number.

In another case, the traffic police department conducted a survey to learn about ordinary residents' awareness of traffic regulation in order to decide the appropriate

means for promoting traffic safety awareness. The committee was given fifty questionnaires that were supposed to be randomly distributed to fifty households. Instead, the committee members, two neighborhood activists, and I spent an afternoon filling them out. According to Ms. Gong Pei, “it is a piece of cake, and it is not worthy of residents’ time to do it.” The truth was that she could neither get enough residents to fill the forms out nor did she want to bother spending time on it herself.

Suspect Corruption. The most embarrassing moment of my research was when I asked Ms. Gong Pei for the committee’s financial books. Her face immediately turned into cloud and she grew extremely suspicious of my request. I suddenly realized that something was wrong, and the following moment of silence between her and me was really uncomfortable. Later, Ms. Han Xue whispered to me that that I should never ask for that type of information again. In the end, I never had a chance to read the financial books.⁴⁷

The attitudes of Ms. Gong Pei and Han Xue made me cautious about the sensitivity of the financial information in the committee. It was often that committee members used the office phone for private purposes and this act—though seemingly trivial—might have involved elements of serious corruption. However, some serious corruption might occur. First, the committee creates a revenue source by offering one of its offices for gambling. It provides tables and chairs, drinks, and air conditioning for people to play *Majiong* every afternoon except Sunday.⁴⁸ In return, the committee

⁴⁷ It is the only committee where I could not get its financial information, even though I was treated as a government-sponsored researcher.

⁴⁸ *Majiong* is an extremely popular Chinese game, which is used for both gambling and entertainment.

charges each table two *yuan* for each round of play. The room has five tables, which are often occupied fully throughout the afternoon. Therefore, it would not be hard to collect fifty *yuan* each afternoon. This is big money since the Weifang Street Office only appropriates 450 *yuan* per month for the committee's operating budget. And the committee would of course never record the revenue earned from such activities in the financial books, especially since the government has recently banned *Majiong* tables and the holding of other gambling in a public space.

In addition, the committee leases out one of its offices to a trading company as a warehouse. No one but the committee director knows the leasing price. The space leased out is 70 m² with a market value of roughly 3,000 *yuan* per month. Ms. Han Xue believed that the company only paid 350 *yuan* per month.

Summary

The Jingtai Residents Committee is exceptional because of its commitment only to the function of social control. Although it is only two years old, the committee plays quite an active role in surveillance of politically-sensitive targets that live in the community. Meanwhile, it makes no effort to serve or to represent its constituents. In general, the Jingtai Resident Committee is rather reminiscent of the old imagine of the pre-reform era: it looks quite a bit like a penetrative social control instrument. However, being an alienated and marginalized player, the committee has rather limited control capacity: it did little regarding birth control, the household registration system, or administrative services.

Nevertheless, it is still enlightening to see that the committee has a rather primitive style of political functioning... yet it happens to sit in one of the most economically advanced communities in China. The committee is not substantively different—in terms of functionality—from the traditional politics of the previous totalitarian system. However, the Jingtai Community is a completely new neighborhood in terms of what it has become since economic liberalization. It is a fortunate thing that I was able to study the committee when I was, because the timing is critical for interpreting the coexistence of the seemingly incongruent elements that made up the functionality and context of the committee. The Jingtai committee seems to present a kind of continuity with old politics, but it does this inside of a dramatically new context that has almost nothing in common with the politics of old. This kind of politicking existing inside of this kind of dramatically different environment exemplifies what has broadly been called “China Paradox.” The presence of a free economy in tandem with authoritarian politics truly challenges one’s imagination. The fact that the Jingtai Residents Committee falls into the penetrative model suggests one major thing: profound economic transformations have changed little the dynamics of the grassroots interactions between the state and ordinary citizens. Is this lesson applicable to other communities? The Huashan Community offers its own story.

Huashan – A Corporatist Residents Committee

If the Jingtai Community has been an economic winner in the reform era, the Huashan has clearly been a loser. Bumpy roads, broken windows, rampant rubbish weed, litter, and dark stairways marked this huge blue-collar neighborhood with nearly 6,000 residents. The community has twenty-eight six-floored buildings, all of which contain public apartments owned by the local government housing department. The community was built in 1983 to accommodate workers who came to work for several new manufacturing plants at the outskirts of the Hebei District. Most Huashan adults worked for the Xinhua Bicycle Factory and the Tianjin Number Eight Textile Factory. The former went bankrupt in 1997, and the latter has cut its labor force nearly eighty percent from its peak level of employment. As the result, the Huashan Community has been hard hit economically and has not recovered.

Huashan Residents Committee

The Huashan Residents Committee was created in 1985 primarily for the purpose of curbing thefts and robberies that occurred in the newly built Huashan Community.⁴⁹ Since then, the committee has gone through puzzling integration, separation, and reintegration with its two neighboring communities, Yuanshan and Tongshan. The committee finally came into being as it is today in 2001.

The committee has seven members. The director, Mr. Cao Hui, is a state employee from the Meiyuan Street Office. He took the position during a very difficult time when the Huashan residents clashed with the committee and the Meiyuan Street

⁴⁹ Interview with Grandma Liu Jiafeng, the first director of the Huashan Residents Committee.

Office over a disputed road project on May 1, 2003.⁵⁰ All of the other committee members are female; two are retired workers and four were formerly unemployed. The committee occupies a 40m² apartment, which is too tight to even house all of its members. Indeed, one can barely find a place to stand in the office, and the committee has to divide and share some obsolete office furniture that was purchased in the 1980s. And although the new committee under Mr. Cao has been subjected to some very tough changes since 2003, this section of the project primarily discusses the functions of the committee as they were before 2003.

Social Control

The economic downturn in the Huashan neighborhood has greatly worsened the security situation in this blue-collar community. The community currently has 833 laid-off workers and this number is likely to grow, as the textile factory will apply for bankruptcy soon. As a result, the Huashan Residents Committee faces the toughest social control challenges among all the four committees.

Falun Gong Practitioners. The community is home to twenty-one dedicated *Falun Gong* practitioners, some of whom are even repatriated from protesting in Beijing. Comparing to the Jingtai Residents Committee, the Huashan Residents Committee is more effective in this area for two reasons.

First, the local police set up a dispatch security unit inside the community in late 1999. The unit has two security guards that assist local police in monitoring those practitioners and other politically sensitive subjects, and that assist in dealing with

⁵⁰ It will be discussed in the next chapter.

ordinary crimes. Second, the committee is able to mobilize its 101 building leaders and other neighborhood activists to join in on surveillance operations. These activists have more accurate and timely information about the activities of the practitioners, too, so they are a great resource for the committee to be able to deploy in its effort to maintain social order.

The committee, with the dispatch security unit and neighborhood activists, is capable of arranging 24-hour surveillance over the practitioners. For example, it takes such a measure during major holidays and big political events, such as the Spring Festival or the annual meeting of the National People's Congress. This partially explains why no practitioners have gone to Beijing to protest since 2000.⁵¹

The stories of both the Jingtai and Huashan Residents Committees show that the state still maintains the effective means for controlling political targets in contemporary China. Both committees are rather supportive of the state's control policies. As a result, the local police are well informed, and can therefore allocate their forces efficiently. In the Jingtai Community, the police completely rely upon the Jingtai Residents Committee for control, as only a few practitioners reside there. In contrast, the police built more capacity in the Huashan Community, as the community was once home to a local chapter of *Falun Gong* and still has many diehard practitioners for residents today.

Other Socially Discontented Individuals. Street protests in China have exploded in frequency in recent years, which reflects the increasing tension in contemporary Chinese society (Tanner, 2004). Although these street protests are not

⁵¹ Interview with one security guard, Ms. Hao Ting.

politically motivated, street protest is still considered a threat to social stability.⁵² Local governments are particularly against them, as the protesters' main goal is often to gain sympathy from higher state officials, hoping that these officials will help to alleviate their personal sufferings that are often blamed on the policies of local government. These local governments thus try very hard to contain discontented individuals that they think may have the intention to protest.

The Huashan Community is home to “famous” street protesters. Mr. Cao Hui complained that his committee has had to work like firefighters. Whenever there were troubling signs, the committee would first arrange close surveillance and then rush to prevent the trouble. The job was not easy, since no one would consider protesting unless there were no alternatives. Protestors thus—in the experience of the Huashan Community—are a difficult lot to please. This means that the committee has to spend tremendous effort in trying to convince the individual(s) to give up.

In one case, Grandpa Niu, a 78 years old resident, threatened to protest in Beijing. He had a dispute with the Gaoyang County Court as the later failed to follow through on granting him a compensation plan for three years. The committee knew that Grandpa Niu's threat was credible, since he had protested in Beijing in 2002 when the Sixteenth National Congress of the CCP was convened. His intention put great pressure to the Meiyuan Street Office.

In order to put out the “fire,” the committee and local street officials first tried to persuade and even discourage Grandpa Niu, but failed. In the end, Mr. Cao Hui and a

⁵² Most street protests target issues pertained to individual lives, such as personal injury, salary in arrears, land dispute, and medical malpractice.

local street official had to travel twice to Gaoyang County Court to explain the seriousness of the issue. Under pressure, the court decided to pay 3,500 *yuan* and to offer a verbal apology to Grandpa Niu, which finally defused the crisis.

This is not an example of a mediation case involving only ordinary residents (or other non-state players), which has little or no political consequences. Threatening a street protest implies a potential conflict between the state and residents (or non-state players), which clearly does have political consequences. In this regard, the committee is doing a political favor to the state by stabilizing the neighborhood.

Released Convicts. The same strategy used for monitoring potential protesters is also applied to released convicts. The committee has maintained a watch list of those released within five years.⁵³ Among the thirteen residents on the list, most of them are stable, except for one who has recently been involved in a dispute with his parents. The committee has notified the building leader to watch him very carefully and to report any abnormal activity.

Family Planning (Birth Control) Policy and Household Registration System.

The committee is much more effective than the Jingtai Residents Committee as far as these functional areas are concerned. The committee maintains very detailed records vis-à-vis the household registration system. For example, it has a file for each female resident of childbearing age, including her ID number, age, and family composition; it even contains information about her career, her close relatives, the means of contraception she utilizes, etc. The committee also prepares a list of so-called “key

⁵³ Those with no signs of recidivism after five years of release will be taken off from the watch list.

persons”, including unemployed women, self-employed women, and women who were remarried but not qualified for an additional child. Assisted by neighborhood activists, the committee can easily find out who violates the family planning policy. And according to the records, there has been only one violation of the family planning policy in the history of the Huashan Community. That occurred during a transitional time when the committee was regrouped and re-constructed in 1997.⁵⁴

Neighborhood Mediation. Because of how widespread conditions of economic hardship are, the community is witness to lots neighborhood bickering and fighting. The story about the “beheaded” mulberry tree in Chapter Two is an example of only a minor dispute. There are consistently many much more serious disputes that take place on a regular basis that require the committee’s mediation. This kind of mediation prevents neighborhood squabbles from becoming criminal activities, which could ease the state’s burden in terms of public security.

Table 4-1 shows the number of cases mediated by the committee over the years. These cases have covered a wide range of neighborhood issues, involving everything from marriage to issues of heritage rights to how best to support seniors to neighborhood disputes... some have even involved adultery.

⁵⁴ The committee member responsible for the failure was laid off, as I was told.

Table 4-1: Cases of Neighborhood Mediations in the Huashan Residents Committee (1985-2003)

Year	Number of mediations⁵⁵
1985	n.a.
1986	52
1987	n.a.
1988	36
1989	21
1990	30
1991	26
1992	8
1993	21
1994	13
1995	15
1996	n.a.
1997	n.a.
1998	22
1999	44
2000	29
2001	64
2002	40
2003	52

Community crime. Even if the above-mentioned social control jobs are still manageable, fighting community crime seems to be a “mission impossible” for the committee. According to the committee’s report to the Meiyuan Street Office, seven crimes occurred in the community in the first quarter of 2003, five burglaries and two robberies. In a public notice to residents, the committee and local police station together warned all residents to be very vigilant and to be on the lookout for any suspicious person and activity inside the community, since seventeen crimes occurred between October 1 and December 15 of 2003. The committee and local police believed that outsiders committed most of those crimes.

⁵⁵ Cases before 1997 and cases in 2000 only cover the Huashan Community, not including the Yuanshan and Tongshan Communities. The rest includes the three communities, i.e., the Huashan Community after regrouping.

There are many reasons for this level of neighborhood insecurity. First (and most obviously) the economic deprivation in the whole area is a key factor. However, Mr. Cao Hui also pointed his blame-finger at local governments as well as his predecessors. The community has seven gates and none of them are guarded. “We are living in a defenseless castle. It is like a house with its door unlocked. One can come in and leave freely. How can we expect to have a safe community while we do not guard our gates?” he complained.⁵⁶

The street office and police station refused to provide money to put guards at gate or to extend the hours of neighborhood security-watching patrol. Soliciting money from residents was also impossible, not only because of how poor and economically depressed the residents of the Huashan Community had become, but also because of the bad reputation Ms. Cao Hui’s predecessors had left the committee with. In the year 2000, the then committee director had solicited 10 *yuan* per household in the name of putting guards at each gate. However, only two empty sentry boxes were built eventually.

Service Provision, Neighborhood Economy and Cozy Politics

The committee’s function in service provision can best be analyzed by being broken down into two sections: first, there are those administrative services that have been consistent from 1985 to today, and there are those that existed only before 2003.

⁵⁶ In China, many urban communities are closed from the outside by walls and gates, like the Jingtai, Deji, and Shiyan Communities. Even the Huashan Community has walls and gates, although they are poorly maintained.

Administrative Services Persisting until Today. These include governmental evaluations (and examinations or appraisals), neighborhood cleanup campaigns, charity and donation activities, government-sponsored censuses and surveys, and many other things. They come down from local governments and often require participation from ordinary residents.

The apathy from residents as far as these services are concerned creates difficulties for the committee. Despite their reluctance to deal with these types of initiatives that come down from above, the committee does not deal idly with those assignments. I participated in a governmental survey involving all types of organizations in and around the neighborhood, including schools, clinics, convenience stores, and small businesses. It was an exhausting job, since many organizations refused to cooperate. They worried that the survey might lead to their being assigned new financial expenses for them in the future, such as taxes and fees. It often took more than twenty minutes to get one survey done. However, unlike the Jingtai Residents Committee, the Huashan Residents Committee carried out the survey seriously without cooking or forgery.

Service Existing Only Before 2003. This is the area of operation and services that most clearly defines the way in which the Huashan Resident Committee is currently operating and defines the way that its current structure has evolved. The committee had committed most of its energy to the so called the “neighborhood economy.”⁵⁷ It had run a group of neighborhood businesses and treated them as its absolute priority (Table 4-2).

⁵⁷ The Meiyuanzhuang Street Office defined it as neighborhood economic activities that could serve residents and reduce the street office’s fiscal burden.

This experience is unique, as the Dejia and Shiyan Residents Committees have participated in economic activities only on a very limited basis, and the Jingtai Residents Committee has never participated in anything similar.⁵⁸

Table 4-2: Neighborhood Economy Managed by the Huashan Residents Committee (1986-2003)

(yuan)			
Year	Income	Expenditure	Net income
1986	11,197 ⁵⁹	10,650	547
1987	7,052	4,922	2,130
1988	6,082	5,023	1,059
1989	790 ⁶⁰	657	133
1990	4,202	867	3,335
1991	14,218	8,828	5,391
1992	7,902 ⁶¹	n.a.	n.a.
1993	15,322	1,890	13,433
1994	n.a.	n.a.	12,354
1995	n.a.	n.a.	17,168
1996	n.a.	n.a.	12,750 ⁶²
1997	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1998	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1999	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2000	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2001	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2002	n.a.	n.a.	17,928
2003	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Generally speaking, the committee ran quite a successful business. It generated a net profit of 547 *yuan* in the first year, and the monthly income was only seven *yuan* for the director and five *yuan* for other committee members.⁶³ By 1993, the net income had

⁵⁸ The businesses in the Dejia and Shiyan Residents Committees were terminated in 1997.

⁵⁹ All numbers are rounded up.

⁶⁰ The numbers in 1989 is only for the January. The numbers for the whole year were not available.

⁶¹ The number in 1992 covers only from January to October.

⁶² The number in 1996 covers only from January to August. The target of net revenue was set to 20,400 *yuan*.

⁶³ The expenditure in 1986 was extremely high because of the cost of initial investments.

reached 13,433 *yuan*, an amount that could have allowed the committee to hire seventy-five committee members.⁶⁴

The initial businesses that were run by the Huashan Residents Committee included repairing bicycles and selling milk and bread. Those services proved to be extremely popular in an age of scarce goods and services. The success of the business surprised the committee, since it did not realize that making money was so easy.⁶⁵ However, problems quickly emerged, as the business continued to grow. Operating the business started to consume much of the committee's time. For most of the time, the committee had to assign three of its members to running the business. There was a period between 1992 and 1994 when all the members were directly involved in the business. This greatly compromised the committee's capacity to handle other neighborhood affairs, such as neighborhood security and cleanups.

To make things even worse, the neighborhood economy had changed form a bit. Over the years, its orientation shifted from providing residents with convenient services to seeking profit and selling products wherever and however it could (Table 4-3). Some of the newer businesses that had appeared in the Huashan neighborhood—such as the various shoe workshops, garment workshops, and plastic workshops—produced bulk goods primarily for outside consumers rather than for Huashan residents. The electronic gaming center that had also appeared was more controversial, as many residents were not comfortable with how much the center seemed to be creating a dangerous new kind

⁶⁴ The monthly income for a committee member was 15 *yuan* in 1992, according to the committee's annual report.

⁶⁵ Interview with Grandma Gao Xuxia, a former committee member in charged of neighborhood mediation.

of indulgence for their children to engage in. It was however a very profitable 2,000-yuan business for the committee. The noises from the plastic and shoe workshops were also very annoying to neighborhood residents.

Table 4-3: Types of Neighborhood Businesses in the Huashan Residents Committee⁶⁶

Types of services	Year of creation
Bicycle repairing	1986
Bicycle rental	1987
Shoe repairing	1986
Shoe workshop	1990 (closed in 1992 for losing money)
Appliance repairing	1986
Barber shop	1986
Draining service	1986
Milk, bread, candle, and stamp	1986 (later expanded three convenient stores)
Tailor store	1986
Lunch for students	1988 (later expanded to a cafeteria and three restaurants)
Garment workshop	1991
Neighborhood cleaning	1987
Entertainment rooms	1991
Nursery	1986 (later expanded into four)
Drug store	1993
Plastic workshop	1989
Electronic gaming center	1992 (closed in 2001)
Flower shop	1993
Home decoration shop	1997

There were several even more contentious issues that soured and antagonized the committee's relationship with its residents. Many residents blamed those outsiders who worked in the community's businesses for how insecure the community had become in terms of crime. The committee was thus essentially accused of being double-dealing as it expressed concerns about neighborhood security on the one hand while it

⁶⁶ The table is not a complete list of what the Huashan Residents Committee was doing. In addition, each type of service might change from time to time in its content and scale.

also allowed and even seemed to invite so many outsiders in to work and live in the community.

Another issue that arose between the committee and the residents involved the ten commercial bungalows that were built on the public land of the community—in accordance with the lobbying efforts and permission of the committee. The Huashan residents deeply resented the committee’s decision, as they thought that it was they who owned the public land, and not the committee. Accordingly, the residents believed that if these bungalows were to be built that the profits from them should be public property. They not unexpectedly became even more upset and cynical, then, about the fact that the committee had never publicized any details about either its own economic activities or about the usage of the profits from the bungalows. It was widely believed among the residents that the committee must have many “secrets” that could not be admitted publicly about where the money was going.

The committee’s businesses also provoked another type of resentment. Because of heavy unemployment in the community, the working opportunities at the committee’s businesses became quite attractive, particularly to the unemployed women of the community.⁶⁷ However, a very few residents were actually hired. The committee preferred outsiders to its residents, as the latter were often accused of being privileged, choosy, and hard to be managed.⁶⁸ But residents believed that this argument was only a pretext for the nepotism that they perceived to be occurring in the hiring process. They

⁶⁷ There were around fifty working positions either through the committee’s direct hiring or through those who rented the commercial bungalows for business.

⁶⁸ Interview with a former director of the committee, Grandma Liu Jiafeng.

complained that only neighborhood activists or other connected persons were hired. Even those peasants who collected garbage in the community were thought by the residents to have needed some sort of kinship with somebody in the committee to get their job.

This resentment from ordinary residents quickly fermented as the committee's business continued to grow. Some residents attempted to spill the beans about what they perceived to be the "secret business" of the committee by writing disclosure letters to local governments. Their effort proved futile. Despite the widespread malcontent of the residents and the rumors that made their way to them, local governments—particularly the Meiyuan Street Office—sheltered the committee indiscriminately.

An Interest Symbiosis. The Meiyuan Street Office had been the key partner in the committee's business endeavors over the years. It was the street office that ordered the committee to start neighborhood businesses in the first place. The committee initially opposed the idea. However, the street office made the successful establishment and operation of such businesses the primary item that the committee's over all performance would be evaluated in terms of. Since each committee member's stipend was tied to the evaluation, the committee was actually pushed to "*xiahai*" [jump into the ocean] as far as these businesses were concerned.⁶⁹

The street office also provided critical logistic and material support for these committee-run businesses. It provided all of the start-up and all the subsequent financial supports that were required. In addition, it brought in goods for the committee to sell in

⁶⁹ *Xiahai* was a catchword in 1980s, describing the act of starting engaging in business outside of the planned economic system.

the community. It even arranged for outside buyers for the plastic goods, shoes, and clothes that were made in the community.

When the disputes over the bungalows and the public land rose, the street office repeatedly reminded Huashan residents that all property of the community—including the apartments and public land—was owned by the state. On its public posters to residents, the street office upheld the committee’s decision to build the bungalows and “kindly” told the residents not to stall the process. It also strongly backed the committee’s effort to stop the few residents who intended to use their apartments for convenience stores or small dining rooms. The street office even threatened to take back their apartments if those residents insisted on using them commercially.

So, why did the street office so unconditionally support the committee? The committee’s annual reports to the street office disclosed the reason. There was a “4-1-5” revenue sharing plan between the committee and the street office. According to the plan, the committee took forty percent of the net income from all of the business operations in the neighborhood. The street office got ten percent, and the remaining fifty percent was put into a “depository fund for neighborhood betterment,” which was to be managed by the street office. That is to say, the street office actually acquired sixty percent of the revenue from the establishment and operation of these committee businesses.

Since the Huashan Residents Committee was a top revenue contributor among the seventeen Residents Committees that were subjected to the authority of the Meiyuan Street Office, the street office certainly made an all-out attempt to shield the committee

from the complaints of Huashan residents. Indeed, this interest symbiosis was not a secret to residents at all. What they did not know was how exactly the profit was divided. There was no complete information available that they could use to locate the final destination of the profits. However, one could still assemble a pretty clear picture about the situation by amalgamating various pieces of information. For example, a former director of the Meiyuan Street Office was dismissed in 2000 for alleged corruption that was associated with the depository fund. The rumor was that he was largely innocent, since he did not embezzle the fund for himself, but distributed it as bonus to the street office employees. The committee's documents also showed that the businesses had greatly increased the benefits of the committee members and neighborhood activists. For example, the committee distributed 452 *yuan* to its members in July of 1988. The monthly stipend for a committee member was less than 10 *yuan* at that time. In January 1990, the committee spent 1,393 *yuan* "for its members." Precise breakdowns for how this 1,393 *yuan* was spent were not available. During the first three months in 1992, the average committee member received more than 25 *yuan* per month, and they also received year-end bonus of 210 *yuan*. Neighborhood activists received year-end bonuses of 28 *yuan* each in the same year.

Summary

As far as the area of social control is concerned, the Huashan Residents Committee has a very similar nature to that of the Jingtai Residents Committee, even though they each operate in two dramatically different communities. The former committee is obviously stronger than the latter as far as implementing the state's

political and administrative control imperatives is concerned, anyway. However, this fact only reinforces the argument that the state is still capable of penetrating the urban grassroots level in an economically liberalizing society. The Huashan Community faces greater challenges in terms of social control, so the state has established more of a presence in that community. The local police even established a dispatch security unit to maintain effective control.

However, this does not imply that the Huashan Residents Committee simply repeats the story of the Jingtai case. The Huashan Residents Committee still managed to provide some administrative services, although they were of limited scope. What really distinguishes the Huashan Committee from the other three committees is its deep involvement in economic activities. This committee, with strong support from the street office, was able to create vibrant businesses that made considerable profits. The committee operated daily businesses while the street office was essentially the guarantor both of a monopoly status and the necessary logistics and resource supports for the committee. In the end, the interest symbiosis of the street office and the committee shared the profits. This type of collusion is more closely comparable to the structure and dynamics described by the corporatist model of governance, rather than to the dynamic of strict domination exhibited by the type of governing-entities that are described by the penetrative model.

For ordinary Huashan residents, this interest symbiosis was very problematic. Since the interests of the committee directly relied upon its business operations, the

committee had quickly metamorphosed into a semi-commercial entity only concerned with making a profit. Its business operations consumed much of the energy, attention, and resources that could otherwise have been devoted to serving its residents. More controversial was the nature of the collusion between the street office and the committee, because the symbiosis they had only cared to fatten itself. The symbiosis occupied public land, favored relatives and close patrons, prohibited other competitors, and concealed its operations and profit from public scrutiny. This exclusive symbiosis benefited a few but clearly sacrificed the larger public interest of the community.

It is widely recognized that Chinese local governments are actively engaging in economic activities by cultivating a corporatist network with private capital. Some believe that this corporatist structure is a key institutional factor in explaining China's rapidly economic expansion (Oi, 1992). However, mobilizing a Residents Committee into moneymaking businesses is an inherently flawed venture, particularly so if the operation is carried out in a corruptive way. As the Huashan case shows, the cozy nature of political and economic interests displaced the committee's normal duties, ruined its reputation, alienated its ties with residents, and created a distrustful and even conflictive neighborhood environment.

So far, both the Jingtai and Huashan cases indicate that the relationship between state and society only runs one direction. The communist state continues to manipulate society either through traditional top-down penetration or through the insulated quid pro quo of corporatist structures of governance. Both cases also reveal a significant tension between ordinary residents and the state's persistent top-down influence at the urban

grassroots level. This fact points to a pessimistic end regarding the outline of the broad “China paradox” between a liberal economy and a politics of authoritarianism. Is the system passively responding to social and economic pressures with domination and containment only? The following Deji and Shiyan cases provide rather different scenarios.

Dejia – A Synergistic Residents Committee

The Dejia Community is a quiet residential compound located on the Pudong Street. It was once one of the best communities in Tianjin City in the mid-1990s. Nowadays, it has become a typical living place for upper-middle class residents, like so many more advanced communities like the Jingtai Community have lately become.

The community has thirty-four six-floored and seven-floored concrete buildings, hosting 1,578 households and 4,480 residents. It has a mixed structure of property ownership. Two-thirds of its apartments are privately owned, and the remaining are state-owned and leased out at discount prices to those so-called *huiqianhu*, the went-backers.⁷⁰

Dejia Residents Committee

The Dejia Residents Committee was created in the early 1950s. At that time, members of the committee were often jobless and illiterate grandmas, working for the state voluntarily. However, the committee's responsibilities have completely changed in the reform era, as has its structure.

The Pudong Street Office dramatically reorganized the committee in 1997. Today, the committee has five members. The director, Ms. Li Lan, is a state employee from the street office. Three members are retired workers and one was formerly unemployed. This is an efficient team that serves its residents in many ways. As a former committee member, Grandma Xue Xiulan, joked, "I would meet [Karl] Marx

⁷⁰ The went-backers were the original residents of the Dejia Community, who often have low-income status. They were allowed to return to the community at the government-subsidized price when the community was completely rebuilt in 1993.

very quickly if I was working under Li Lan. The committee has so many things to do. I would rather save my old bones and take care of my grandson.”

Social Control

Neighborhood Security Network. The security network of the Dejia Community is built around the committee. The network has one leading team and four groups. The core of the network is the neighborhood security promotion team, which consists of members of the committee, neighborhood activists, police officers, and representatives from working units around the community. The team meets once a month to discuss security problems. Ms. Li Lan, the team leader, can convene the team when she deems it so necessary.

The first group under the team is the help and education group, which targets politically sensitive subjects and released convicts. The group includes committee members, police officers, building leaders, and parents or relatives of subjects. The second is the mediation group, which aims to prevent neighborhood disputes from escalating into criminal cases. It includes committee members, building leaders, and those residents who are respected in the community, such as retired high-level officials and teachers. The third group is the floating population control group. Community members, local police, building leaders, and neighborhood activists join the group to handle the increasing numbers of floating population that move in and out of the community. Finally, there is also the neighborhood patrol group, which consists of committee members and neighborhood activists. In its daily security patrols, the team is

watchful for many things including crime, outsiders, fire, gas and sewage leak, litter, and neighborhood disputes.

The four groups have a division of labor, yet the functions of their members partially overlap from time to time. They and the leading neighborhood security promotion team together have built a robust social control network in the community. The committee is therefore able to maintain very effective social control in multiple areas.

Falun Gong Practitioners. The three *Falun Gong* practitioners that live in the community are observed by the help and education group. The group is supposed to visit them at least once a month so that they can learn about their latest thoughts and activities. The committee also arranges for special control measures against them during the observance of major Chinese holidays or political moments, which includes setting up 24 hour surveillance over them.

The committee has expressed some reluctance related to this issue. In the eyes of many on the committee, these practitioners are not bad people, but are merely ordinary residents who happen to be members of a cult. It would be inappropriate for the committee as a neighborhood organization to punish its residents for these sorts of reasons.⁷¹ Some committee members have insisted that local police take over responsibility for the surveillance of the practitioners of *Falun Gong*. As a result, the committee often only winks at this issue. It has greatly relaxed its security measures

⁷¹ Interview with Ms. Wang Xiaomin, the committee member responsible for social control.

against the practitioners since 2001. For example, the once monthly home visit has been reduced in frequency to only four or five times a year.

The committee's attitude does however contain some ambiguity related to this issue. Although the committee supports the state's policy to abolish the practice of *Falun Gong*, it does not believe that surveillance duty should fall on the committee itself. At least, the committee feels that the three practitioners in its community are not dangerous or evil. They should be treated as residents, not as the enemy.⁷² The rift between the committee and the state related to this issue reflects the rising self-consciousness of the committee.

Released Convicts. While the committee only muddled through its assignment regarding *Falun Gong* practitioners, it earnestly tries to help the three released convicts to reintegrate into the community. The committee adopts very humane but effective means for doing so. For example, the group members frequently pay home visits and help to solve their practical problems. All three released convicts had financial problems. On each home visit, the committee brought some living items like cooking oil, flour, and meat. The committee even helped the released female convict to find a job at a nearby publishing house. The group also teamed up with the convicts' parents or spouses to influence them morally.

All three released convicts now have jobs and feel very grateful to the committee. One of them, Mr. Shi Hongpo, told me how the committee helped set up a family meeting in prison with his sons and wife. "At that moment [when his wife told

⁷² Interview with Ms. Wang Xiaomin.

him about the hard life the family had] I felt so much remorse and guilt for the harm I did to my family. I felt that I would be worse than a pig, if I did not rectify myself,” he said. Mr. Shi Hongpo and the other male released convict have now become building leaders and serve their neighbors voluntarily. They are also very active in many committee-organized activities. Mr. Shi Hongpo was even rewarded 2,000 *yuan* by the Pudong Street Office for his bravery in single-handedly stopping three car thefts in August 2003.

The committee also makes quite a few efforts to help a young resident that is currently imprisoned in juvenile detention facilities. The committee—along with his parents—often visited him, and even wrote a letter appealing for a reduction in his prison term.

Family Planning (Birth Control) Policy and Household Registration

System. During my research, I was introduced to a story that was very telling about the committee’s performance on these issues in particular. One day the local ward police officer came to borrow the committee’s household registration book. He needed that book so that he could adjust *his* records of household registration, as an inspection team from the Ministry of the Public Security was planning to visit his local police station. Because of the solid household registration system that the Dejia Residents Committee had in place, there has been no violation of the family planning policy since 1997.

Neighborhood mediation. Table 4-4 lists the number of mediation cases that the committee has engaged in over the years. The low number of mediation cases may suggest that there is a low amount of neighborhood bickering and fighting in the Dejia

Community, and this might partially attest to the congenial nature of many of the residents of the community.

Table 4-4: Cases of Neighborhood Mediations by the Dejia Residents Committee (2001-2003)

Year	Number of mediations
2000	14
2001	9
2002	8
2003	16

A special characteristic of the committee’s mediation job is to rely on neighborhood “celebrities” who have moral influence, such as senior governmental officials or schoolteachers. They often have a good reputations and are trustworthy in the community, therefore they serve the mediation role well.

Neighborhood Crime Prevention. The Dejia Community once had suffered greatly from burglaries. It lost twenty-one bicycles and a taxicab in 1999, which pushed the committee to build a gate and establish a neighborhood patrol group. The patrol group originally consisted of seniors only and later was expanded with the inclusion of some welfare beneficiaries, such as Mr. Shi Hongpo. Today the group has thirty-nine members that are all assigned different time slots for patrolling the community. The patrol also gets extended late into the night during major holidays. Burglaries have been drastically reduced since the creation of the patrol group. Later, the patrol group expanded its mission from purely crime watching to many non-security related areas. Over the years, it has helped the disabled and the elderly, battled with littering, prevented fires, reported sewage leaks, and helped with other emergencies.

Floating Population Control. There are some outsiders that live in the Dejia Community, and sometimes they bring trouble with them. For example, there was an apartment that was leased to several young ladies who often held loud parties that went far into the late hours of the night. Some residents suspected they were underground prostitutes. Residents also reported other outsiders destroying the garden and other public facilities. However, the committee had little to do with these complaints, except insofar that it tries to make these outsiders aware of what behaviors were expected of them while they were living in the community. Ms. Wang Xiaomin said, “We do not have the legal power to check on them or ask them to leave. All we can use is persuade. Sometimes we bluff them and hope to intimidate them into going away, but that usually doesn’t work.”

In fact, the committee admits that it cannot keep its information up to date given the constantly changing numbers of outsiders in the community. Ms. Wang Xiaomin suspected that the number was increasing as she saw many unknown faces regularly. “This is a pitfall of our jobs, and we have to find ways to trace them regularly,” she said.

Service Provision

It the committee does well in its social control function, it really performs excellently in its function of service provision. In fact, using Ms. Li Lan’s words, the committee is a “Service Committee.” The committee keeps its door open all year around, including weekends and even during the Spring Festival. Such a schedule literally means that each committee member has only one day off in each week. In

contrast, the Jingtai and Huashan Residents Committees are open only five days a week, and are closed on holidays and weekends.⁷³ One thing to mention additionally is that the committee members do not have overtime pay. Their stipends are fixed at 450 *yuan* per month.

Administrative Service. The committee provides a wide range of services to local governments.

Governmental Censuses and Surveys. The committee does not welcome these jobs in particular, as they are time-consuming, particularly the population census.⁷⁴ However, the committee treats them seriously. I participated in a survey about public behavior with regard to donation and charity. This five-page long questionnaire often took one hour to fill out. Ms. Zhao Chunhui, the committee member responsible for the survey, spent three days finishing the survey. One story illustrates her earnest attitude. One of the selected survey interviewees, a 92-year old grandma, was incapable of answering questions. Instead of cooking the answer, Ms. Zhao Chunhui called the governmental bureau to work out a substitution.

Donation and Other Charity Events. The committee is often asked to solicit donations for disaster relief, poverty relief, and blood donations. Some residents suspect that government officials might abuse their donations by not actually giving them to the needy. Others apparently feel troubled by too many solicitous events. In order to boost donations, the committee members often model themselves by contributing first. In

⁷³ The Huashan Residents Committee keeps eight hours per working day, while members of the Jingtai Residents Committee only work five hours a day.

⁷⁴ The population census every three years is the largest and most strenuous survey done by the committee. It requires the committee to visit each household to get accurate demographic information.

addition, the committee always publicizes the result of each charity event so as to increase their transparency.

Collecting Fees. The committee is regularly asked by local governments to collect fees on their behalf, like cleaning fees, electricity bills, etc.⁷⁵ It is one of the jobs the committee least wants to do, since it gets no compensation at all. In addition, there are always some misers that the committee has to visit repeatedly even for collecting as little as one *yuan* or two. The committee complained several times to the street office hoping to get them to drop this particular duty, but did not succeed.

Self-Governing Service. This refers to the committee-sponsored activities for the benefit of the residents. These kinds of activities have very little to do with the state.

“Ten Good Things Project.” Starting in 2002, the committee promised to solve ten practical problems in the community each year. The to-do list is posted in neighborhood billboards and also sent to residents’ homes in flyers.

Most of items on the list are directly related to the well being of the community (Table 4-5). Ms. Li Lan believed that it was a bold idea to publicize the to-do list, since the committee was then more compelled to fulfill the promise once it went public. Fortunately, most of the items promised were accomplished and well received. The committee continued working on the few remaining items until they were finished.

⁷⁵ They include electronic bill, water bill, gas bill, cleaning fee, and some other ad hoc fees.

Table 4-5: “Ten Good Things Project” in the Dejia Residents Committee

	2002	2003
1	Gifts to residents in poverty before the Spring Festival	Constructing four out-door exercise machines
2	Establishing fresh milk distribution center	Painting a total of thirteen buildings
3	Fixing all electronic bulbs in all building corridors	Establishing two additional senior entertainment rooms
4	Solving the noise disturbance of Rongli Restaurant	Digging and cleaning forty six cesspools
5	Establishing a functional base for the Chinese Communist Youth League	Installing warm gases for ninety-three families in the building # 21 and 22.
6	Cleaning up the dead corner behind the building # 10	Organizing a join summer party with the local military camp
7	Standardizing automobile parking	Organizing a community sporting meeting
8	Organizing a summer evening party	Building three cobblestone massage pathways
9	Setting up three billboards	Celebrating with those centenary residents
10	Solving sewage leak in the building #10	Regulating pets and animals in the community

Cultural Activities. The committee spends a lot of time organizing neighborhood cultural activities, such as summer evening parties, civilian-military gather-together parties, neighborhood sporting meetings, etc. Its cooperation with the YMCA needs special attention. The committee has established cooperative relations with the local YMCA chapter that is part of the Dejia Community. Most of the cultural activities mentioned above are jointly sponsored. In addition, the two organizations create several small neighborhood cultural groups, including a *Yangge* dancing team, a painting and calligraphy society, a harmonica team, a kriegspiel team, a weaving and basketry group, and a literature society. The relations between the two organizations are interesting. The committee is a neighborhood organization with close ties with local governments.

Inversely, it has organizational capacity and connection with ordinary residents. The YMCA is a typical civic organization that has the financial resources and expertise necessary for promoting cultural-related community activities. Together the committee and the YMCA are able to complement each other for the benefit of ordinary residents. This type of grassroots cooperation was hardly seen in earlier Chinese society, which reflects the increasingly complex interactions of the once divided and state-dominated urban community.

Helping the State to Serve Residents. This is the area where the committee spends its major energy to promote the state's initiatives that eventually benefit both the state and local residents.

Social Welfare Programs. There are many social welfare programs in China that require cooperation from grassroots organizations like the Residents Committees. The Deji Residents Committee is a strong facilitator of these programs, which makes it so that the committee has a significant influence on those residents in poverty.

One such social welfare program is the minimum living standard program which is designed to help urban residents in poverty. In order to get assistance from the program, residents have to prove that their level of income is below the minimal living standard set by the municipal government. Although the Bureau of Civil Affairs has the final say in terms of establishing the eligibility requirements for the program, the committee plays a critical role regarding who qualifies. It is responsible for verifying the living conditions of the applicants, pre-screening their applicant packages, and

making annual recommendations about whether or not current program beneficiaries' benefits can or should be extended.

The committee widely publicizes the existence of the program in the community and also identifies qualified applicants from its household registration records. When applicants come in, the committee helps them prepare the application materials, which is a very tedious job. "Some of our applicants simply cannot fill out these complicated forms and gather the required supporting documentation. If we did not help them, they would not be enrolled even if they were well qualified," said Ms. Zhao Chunhui. She also acknowledged that there were some "tricks" that can be employed in case preparation. It does not necessarily mean that information is fabricated, though. "I have to balance the state's guidance and the needs of our residents. There are some in-between cases. What we do is to make the arguments (on behalf of certain residents receiving benefits) appealing to the civil affairs guys." The committee is also able to use its own "discretion" in the annual review process to keep the current beneficiaries in the program.

If the Bureau of Civil Affairs turns down some applications, which happens regularly, then the committee can decide to appeal certain cases based upon their merits. In one case, Ms. Zhao Chunhui visited the bureau four times in order to reactivate the benefit for a 75-year old grandma. The bureau believed that the daughters of the old lady in question could support her without government assistance. Ms. Zhao Chunhui successfully proved that the grandma would be in danger if her benefits were not reactivated. Finally, the grandma got a 161-*yuan* per month subsidy.

The number of the Dejjia residents enrolled in the program has steadily grown over the years (Table 4-6). In 2003, more than three percent of Dejjia residents were benefiting from the program, which is unusual for such an upper-middle class community. The deputy chief of the residential section of the Pudong Street Office, Ms. Jiao Aixia, once joked about how the Dejjia Community could become “poorer” year by year. She had worked in the committee before she was moved up to the street office; and apparently she knew the tricks and did not mind at all, as the money was not coming from her street office.

Table 4-6: Dejjia Residents Enrolled in the Minimum Living Standard Program

Year	Household	Individual	Annual subsidy (yuan)
1999	36	92	95,736
2000	42	110	122,374
2001	43	113	124,013
2002	47	124	131,582
2003	52	135	140,913

There are also some other welfare programs that are designed to assist special groups, such as the families of veteran, retired cadre officials, seniors with disability, and disabled children. For most of these programs, the committee tries to use the advantage it has in terms of information over the state bureaus to channel more resources to those residents that experience economic hardship. “We would need to find money from other places to help them, if these programs do not cover them. Our goal is simple: to enroll as many as possible. We can use the money saved in other areas,” said Ms. Zhao Chunhui.

Re-Employment Project. This is another statewide governmental program that the committee tries to take advantage of. The Dejjia community had 214 unemployed at

its peak time and nowadays it has only 108. The committee has helped 75 residents find jobs over the years.

The community has three small companies that are involved in household decoration, sewage draining, and escorting elementary students back and forth from school. The committee helped to enlist these companies as “informal employment and labor organizations” in the Re-Employment Project. Under such a title, the government gives 3,000-*yuan* start-up assistance to the three companies and offers them full exemption from taxes and other fees. The three companies together hire fifteen unemployed local residents. The committee also helps those jobless residents who have decided to sell minor grocery items at sidewalk stalls to apply for exempt status from taxes and fees.

In addition, the committee employs a few part-time workers itself, such as the night guards that are posted at the at the community entrance. Finally, it serves as a liaison between unemployed residents and outside employers. It brings employment information into the community and introduces it to its residents for free. One advantage to this for residents is that outside employers often trust persons that are introduced to them by the committee.

“*Starlight Senior Center.*” Most visitors to the community would immediately notice the “Dejia Starlight Senior Center” that is located next to the office of the committee. This well-equipped 150m² center was built in 2002 primarily so as to allow Dejia seniors to engage in various activities. It was funded through the “Starlight Senior Program,” a governmental program to help seniors throughout China. The Dejia

Starlight Senior Center was the first one established in all thirteen communities of the Pudong Street. The committee regarded it as a reward for being consistent in lobbying the street office.

Grassroots Self-Governance

Residential Representation. The opening story in Chapter One shows how the Dejia Residents Committee defended community interests when they came to be in conflict with the economic interests of its power neighbor. However, similar cases are few and are far between. It is not easy for any committee to stand up against the state. The simple fact is that the “commander” of the committee, Ms. Li Lan, is herself a state employee. This explains why she strongly opposed some residents’ suggestions to physically block government buildings or to take even more radical measures. The reason she insisted on legal actions being taken against the Tianjin No. 1 Rest House was simple: if she did not do it, angry residents would have organized a demonstration. This would have created a backlash against her and her committee, anyway. As Ms. Wang Xiaomin said privately, “We felt lucky that the issue was able to be solved peacefully. Director Li [Lan] was under a lot of pressure at that time. I bet she would not know what to do if the Congress [the People’s Congress of Tianjin] were to discard our petition.”

Participatory Management. The committee has done three things to increase the involvement of residents in neighborhood affairs.

Financial Openness. The committee has posted its monthly financial statement at the entrance billboard to inform residents of its financial situation since February

2003. It also posts information about donations and other special events, like, for instance information about the special fund that is raised through the contributions of residents for neighborhood maintenance. This openness sharply contrasts with what the Huashan Residents Committee does.

The Assembly of Residential Representatives (ARR). According to the Pudong Street Office's regulations, the ARR should be the highest authority in a community. It consists of numerous residential representatives.⁷⁶ The committee convenes the ARR twice a year. In these meetings, representatives listen to each committee member report about the substance of her activities, they discuss the committee's future plans, and they evaluate the performance of each member as well as of the committee. It is normal for the committee and its members to receive positive evaluations at these meetings.

Residential Hearing and Ad Hoc Meetings. The committee also holds special meetings in order to hear the suggestions, opinions, and criticisms of residents. I participated in a hearing about an environment project called "Para-Ecological Community." It was a pilot project sponsored by the municipal government to improve the ecological situation of the city. The Deji Community was chosen to do the experiment. According to the initial agreement between the committee and the government-backed company, the company would invest five million *yuan* to improve the environmental system of the community. Since this would be a big project that would cause potential problems and inconveniences for many residents, the committee

⁷⁶ Details of the meetings are discussed both in the next chapter.

called the hearing so as to get residents' opinions on this issue. Residential representatives and some residents listened and debated the project.

Summary

The Deji Residents Committee is very different from the other two committees discussed so far. As far as the social control arena is concerned, the Deji Residents Committee does not fit the penetrative model in terms of the way it operates. Indeed, it behaves quite differently from how a neighborhood organization would be expected to behave if it fit with the predictions and dynamic outlines laid down by the penetrative model. The committee treats its political control function perfunctorily, as is seen in the way that it conducts its surveillance of the *Falun Gong* practitioners that live in the community. However, it is very effective as far as its ability to be in control administratively; specifically, this can be seen in how the committee handles issues involving family planning and the household registration system. Correlatively, it gives equal importance to the imperative of creating a safe and less-frictional neighborhood environment through the administration of a tight neighborhood security network. The committee is also very supportive and effective in handling and monitoring the released convicts that live in the Deji community. Rather than simply monitoring them, the committee spends extra effort in helping them to reintegrate into the community.

As was the case with the penetrative model, the type of functionality described by the corporatist model is inaccurate for characterizing the operation of the Deji Residents Committee. Although the committee has a close relationship with the street office, it has not developed the cozy kind of political/economic interest-collusion that

characterizes to differing extents the Jingtai and Huashan Residents Committees.

Instead, the Deji Residents Committee's connection with the administration often ends up benefiting ordinary Deji residents. It is the committee's cooperation with the state that successfully brings resources from the state into the community, as is seen in the various cases of the minimum living standard program, the re-employment program, or the Starlight Senior Program.

Furthermore, the committee's endeavors involving self-governing services and neighborhood self-governance are also difficult for either the penetrative or corporatist model to explain. In general, the synergistic model explains the committee better than the other models discussed do. The committee has displayed comprehensiveness in terms of its various functionalities, which contributes to this assessment of synergy, as such. More importantly, both the community and the street office benefit from the committee's interactions with the state. As the synergistic model predicts, it is neither the state nor the committee alone, *but the cooperation between them* that contributes a key institutional factor for understanding grassroots political development. The Deji case indicates that the benefits that accumulate from synergy can be greater than they would be in a situation where the two actors (state and committee) function separately.

This discussion of the Deji Residents Committee reveals a different possibility for the "China Paradox," in which the authoritarian state and the urban neighborhood may engage in non-zero-sum cooperation that spans the public-private division and benefits both sides. In the Deji Community, one won't find the level of tension between residents and the committee (and the street office) that are observed in the

Jingtai and Huashan Communities. The grassroots political situation in general seems to be headed in a positive direction in the Dejia Community, where cooperation rather than penetration or collusion dominate the interactions between the state and local residents. The next Shiyan case further exemplifies this point, and it enriches the substance that is and could be found upon conducting further investigation in this direction.

Shiyan – Another Synergistic Residents Committee

The Shiyan Community is just few blocks away from the Deji Community and is divided into two parts. The larger part consists of twenty five-floored and seven-floored buildings that were constructed in 1985, which are jointly owned by residents and their working units (or by the housing department of the state). Residents living in them belong to the middle-to-lower classes of Tianjin City. The smaller part of the community is called the Sinmiao Condominium, which consists of one fifteen-floored high-rising building and two twenty-floored ones. The condominium (which was built after 1998) is one of the most luxurious private compounds in Tianjin City. Like Jingtai residents, people living in the Sinmiao Condominium are part of the elite of the city. The two parts together contain 1,100 families and 3,511 residents.

Shiyan Residents Committee

The committee dated back to 1952. Like the Deji Residents Committee, the Shiyan Residents Committee was also completely reorganized by the Pudong Street Office in 1997. Between that time and 2003, the committee was headed by Ms. Liu, a guileless and steadfast street office employee.

The current committee differs from the other three committees discussed above in many ways. The average age of the committee members is 69, compared to the average age of roughly 46 in other committees. Four out of the five members of the Shiyan Residents Committee are male, while there is only one male member to be found in all three of the other committees combined.⁷⁷ In addition, most of the members

⁷⁷ Mr. Cao Hui in the Huashan Residents Committee.

of other committees are either unemployed or blue-collar workers. In contrast, members in the Shiyan Residents Committee were prominent persons before they joined the committee.⁷⁸ However, what really distinguishes the committee from the others is that the committee is one of the only two experimental committees in Tianjin City whose members were directly elected by residents in 2003. The new committee is still in the middle of a transitional period. While it follows conventions in some respects, the committee has displayed some unique and politically significant characteristics.

Social Control

Neighborhood Security Network. The committee has established a similar neighborhood security network to that of the Deji Residents Committee. The comprehensive security promotion team consists of twenty-three members that all have diverse background; the team includes committee members, neighborhood activists, and representatives from nearby working units.⁷⁹ The team has three other sub-groups that fall under its authority: a neighborhood patrol group with thirty-nine members; a help and reeducation group with fourteen members, and a security watching group with seventy members. Most of the members of these teams are just ordinary residents that volunteer.

⁷⁸ For example, the director, Grandpa Zhao Fu, was the President of the Tianjin Foundry Association (1984-1991) and the Manager of the Tianjin Steel Factory (1977-1984). Grandpa Liu Yunhan was the President of the China Motor Corporation (Tianjin). Grandpa Liu Jingyu had served as the Chairman of the Teacher's Union at Aiguodao Middle School and later the vice President at Xinanlou Middle School. Grandpa Cong Peiguo was the vice President and later senior consultant of the Tianjin International Engineering Corporation. Even Grandma Liu Baolan, who has the least prestigious position, had served as the Chief of the Residential Section in the Xinanjiao Street Office.

⁷⁹ An interesting aspect is that the team does not have police. Indeed, the Shiyan Community is the only one where I did see local police when I was there.

This neighborhood security network enables the committee to exercise effective control in the areas of family planning, neighborhood dispute mediation, and the household registration system. These are policies that the new committee strongly promotes in the same way that its predecessor did. Linking the fact of that these policies have this kind of continuity in the Shiyan Residents Committee with the fact that the other committees had similarly supportive attitudes towards them seems to imply the likelihood that these policies have real support at the grassroots level.⁸⁰ The state has thus perhaps successfully fostered consent for most of its social control policies at the neighborhood level without resorting to coercive means.

The Shiyan Residents Committee applies its security network to social control efforts differently from the other committees.

Falun Gong Practitioners. There are two *Falun Gong* practitioners living in the Shiyan Community, and they are directly handled and monitored by the local police. The committee has successfully persuaded the local police that surveillance of those practitioners is against the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees.⁸¹

This case clearly displays a rift between the state and the committee. Like the Deji Residents Committee, the Shiyan Residents Committee dislikes the prospect of having to be responsible for the surveillance of the *Falun Gong* practitioners. The difference between them is that the Shiyan Residents Committee was able to express its differing opinion on the issue and eventually was able to get off the hook.

⁸⁰ The Jingtai Residents Committee is abnormal as it lacks capacity to implement those policies.

⁸¹ Interview with the committee director, Grandpa Zhao Fu.

However, the rift between the state and the committee cannot be blown up into something it is not. It does not even come close to qualifying as civil resistance. Unlike the dissenting organizations of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, the Shiyang Residents Committee, like the other three committees, supports the government's political decision to ban the practices of the *Falun Gong*. The rift over whether or not it is appropriate for the committee to respond to the directive of the state. As a grassroots self-governing organization with no legal authority, the committee does not feel that it should function like an arm or a part of the local government hierarchy. It disagrees with the state which says that its functions should involve the carrying out of the directives of the state. The committee does not disagree or act in defiance of the state, it just does not see itself as legally bound to execute this particular government policy ... as it would be doing if it were to engage in the surveillance of the practitioners.

Political Education. Since December 2003, the committee has sponsored two political education events that have targeted the children of the community. One has been the ceremony of raising the national flag on the first day of each month, and the other involves a ceremony where the committee invites military veterans to tell their stories about the era of revolution. The committee hopes to teach kids to cherish the life of good fortune that is available to them in contemporary China, and also to increase their patriotism and maturity through the events. These events certainly serve the state's interests well. However, they are different from the old type of political education that was common in the pre-reform era in two respects. First, the committee puts on the

events on its own, rather than according to the orders of the state. And second, unlike the old practices, these events are not compulsory for kids to participate in. Many parents welcome both events, as they agree that today's kids are too coddled and hard to manage. In fact, it is often parents who send their children to attend the events, and they even contribute the funds for the mast and the national flag.

Legal and Security Lectures. The committee regularly holds lectures about legal and security matters for adult residents. Since the lectures cover a wide range of issues close to daily lives, they are well received in the community. Lectures that are related to legal issues are given on subjects like the Constitution, the Marriage Law, the Inheritance Law, the Women and Children Protection Law, the Senior Protection Law, the Law of Contract, and the Administrative Appeal Law. The security lectures cover subjects related to juvenile crime prevention, self-protection techniques, fire protection, burglary prevention, and gas leak prevention. Most of the lectures are attended about seventy audience members. Few lectures have ever had more than two hundred attendees.

“Drug-free Community.” The committee also actively advocates a campaign to increase drug awareness in the community. It began at an ARR meeting in December 2003 with the acknowledgement that drug abuse amongst juveniles was increasing. “Our community did not have drug offenders. However, we worried that drugs would infiltrate our community if we did not take the proper precaution steps to educate our residents, especially our kids,” said Grandpa Liu Jingyu who sponsored the anti-drug initiative. The committee has since undertaken several measures in the campaign,

including holding lectures about drugs and crime; bringing into the community an exhibition of pictures and documents about the consequences of using drugs; and the circulating of an anti-drug signature solicitation.

Service Provision

The Shiyang Residents Committee has also adopted a year-round working schedule. However, unlike the Deji Residents Committee that focuses on working with the state so as to serve its residents, the Shiyang Residents Committee puts more emphasis on self-governing service provision.

Administrative Service. Rather than carrying out governmental assignments ad infinitum, the committee has a different approach to those assignments that do not benefit the community very much. As Grandpa Zhao Fu said, “We are trying to clarify responsibilities with them [local governments]. We are not supposed to take care of everything, but only those things that are relevant to our residents. For those [governmental] assignments that benefit our residents, we would help the government out. However, as for those that are of little interest to our residents, they [local governments] should take care of them themselves, and we should not be responsible. We are not here to baby-sit everyone.”

The committee has declined to accept some assignments from local governments, such as assignments that involved collecting donations and conducting surveys. The Shiyang Residents Committee has also begun getting paid by the state for conducting several of the assignments that other committees conduct for free, such as selling state lotteries and collecting fees, the committee is paid from the state. For

example, the Pudong Street Office agreed to leave fifteen percent of cleaning fees to the committee as compensation for its collection effort.

Helping the State to Serve Residents. The Shiyang Resident Committee welcomes those governmental programs that eventually benefit its residents. However, rather than treating these programs as the top priority in the same way that the Deji Residents Committee does, the committee treats them differently. As Grandpa Zhao Fu stated, “We could facilitate those programs, depending upon our time and resources. However, the government should be ultimately responsible for them. If it was really serious about those programs, it would devote more resources to the community down here.” For instance, he believed that the Bureau of Civil Affairs should hire social welfare coordinators to work at the community level so that they could directly manage the programs of the state. The Shiyang Residents Committee could assist them, but could not function as a replacement for the state workers.

Table 4-7 shows how the Shiyang and Deji Residents Committees treat the welfare programs differently. In terms of the percentage of residents that received welfare benefit out of the total population, the Shiyang Residents Committee enrolled less than half of what the Deji Residents Committee did... and this disparity would probably be even greater if the income levels of the two communities are taken into consideration. Additionally, there is no evidence that shows that the Shiyang Residents Committee did better than the Deji Residents Committee in promoting neighborhood re-employment.

Table 4-7: Welfare and Re-Employment Assistances Between the Shiyan and Dejia Communities (2003)

	Shiyan	Dejia
Total population	3,511	4,480
Numbers of residents enrolled in the minimum living standard program	50	135
Total amount of money from the program (<i>yuan</i> per month)	2,866	11,742
Unemployed residents at peak time	228	214
Re-employed residents (those helped through the Residents Committee)	122 (n.a.)	106 (75)

Self-Governing Service. The Shiyan Residents Committee has initiated a wide variety of services that are tailored to the community. Many are innovative and are well received by residents.

“*Sunshine Community Hotline.*” This is the first community hotline that has been established in Tianjin City, aiming at providing instant services to its residents. The hotline has had numerous calls since its opening (Table 4-8). Some of the calls ask for minor assistance with a variety of different things. For example, a five-year old boy called asking for a tin opener for a bottle of Coca Cola. Others calls are rather serious, involving everything from preventing bicycle thefts to saving people’s lives. In March 2004, the committee’s quick response to a call helped save the life of an old lady who was in a coma because of a cerebral hemorrhage.

Table 4-8: Sunshine Community Hotline in the Shiyan Community

	Number of calls
December, 2003	42
January, 2004	79
February, 2004	54
March, 2004	61
April, 2004	77
May, 2004	73

Senior Service. The community has 824 residents that are over the age of sixty, which represents nearly a quarter of its total population. The committee spends a lot of effort in trying to help and support them. In July 2003, just one month after the direct election, the committee established the Association of Shiyan Seniors. The goal was for the association to work with the committee to promote the interest of seniors.

The committee conducted a survey and a hearing in August 2003 to learn about the difficulties and needs of seniors in the community. Several programs were launched according to the findings.

The committee organized several free medical examinations for seniors where their blood pressure and weight were checked, and where medical personnel were able to consult with them personally for the sake of educating them about health protection measures. The committee also arranged for free haircuts for those seniors that had difficulty moving from one place to another. And to those residents that are eighty and older, the committee gives small gifts such as “Longevity Noodles” and flowers to them during the Spring Festival and on the National Senior Day.

In order to encourage seniors to join outdoor exercises, the committee and the senior association sponsor a unique daily walking project, called the “10,000 Meters Walk Project.” So far, nearly 130 seniors have participated in the project. The *Chinese Senior Daily* released a special report about the project. The Tianjin General Commission on Sports even called all Tianjin communities to learn about the project.

Children and Juvenile Service. The lectures on drugs and political education are good examples of services the committee provides to its your residents. In addition, the

committee has created an organization called the “Young Falcon Troop.” The kids that take part in this organization help to protect lawns and trees, collect litter, clean stairways, and assist seniors and the disabled. The committee also provides internship and labor education opportunities for students from neighboring elementary and middle schools and from the Tianjin Normal University.

Community Citizenry School. This school targets the general public in the community. Based upon residents’ interests, the committee invites scholars, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and other experts to give lectures or to teach classes. The classes cover a wide variety of issues, including contemporary hot social and political topics, health protection and nutrition issues, cooking, gardening, dancing, literature, Chinese calligraphy, English and Japanese, music instruments, and Yue Opera. Some of the classes, such as the ballroom dancing and Japanese studies classes, require tuition, but most classes offered in the school are free and open to everyone, even including residents from other communities. Most of the classes are held during evenings or weekends to encourage more participation.

Neighborhood Diversionary Clubs. In order to sustain and deepen the various cultural activities that go on independently in the community, the committee encourages and supports residents who form various groups for the purposes of enjoying themselves in leisure or diversionary activities. Nowadays, the Shiyan Community has a Yue Opera team, two *Taiji* martial arts teams, a body mechanics team, a dancing club, an English club, a Chinese calligraphy club and a literature club. The eight teams have

nearly four hundred active members, which greatly enhances the cultural environment inside the community.

“*Sunshine Neighborhood Games.*” This is another unique social activity that can be found in the community. The games are organized as buffet-style events, and they go for six months between April and September. Each month, the committee organizes three different games. All games are tailored to be cheap but interesting and suitable for everyone. For example, the committee invents a game, *jiaqiu*, where each player needs to walk towards a destination while holding a basketball against their back. Many residents—particularly children and seniors—enjoy the games a lot. The winners usually receive small prizes, such as pencils or toothbrushes.

“*A Hundred Community Stars Campaign.*” This is a campaign sponsored by the committee that attempts to promote neighborhood harmony and unity. During this campaign, residential representatives elect a total of about a hundred community “stars” every half-year, including the Civilized Family “Star,” the Good Resident “Star,” the Good Daughter-in-Law, Good Mother-in-Law, Good Building Leader, Good Youngster, Good Learning-Style Family, and the Outstanding Volunteer. Each star represents a type of good ethic or behavior that is advocated in the Community Covenant. All stars are then publicly honored. Their names are posted at each entrance to the community. They also get small gifts as prizes.

Grassroots Self-Governance

While the committee has displayed many unique characteristics in terms of both social control and service provision, it is best defined for its progress in grassroots self-

governance. In Grandpa Zhao Fu's words, "We are the first directly elected Residents Committee in Tianjin City, and our goal is to create a true self-governing organization, not an ornament." To achieve that goal, the committee has undertaken serious effort to promote self-governance in the community.

Residential Representation. As an elected body, the committee works hard to represent and defend the interests of the community.

Defending Residential Interests from the State. There is a symbolic event that takes place every so often which shows how the committee stands with its constituents. The street office has two old bungalows in the community, which are leased out for grocery and audio/video shops. The street office receives a 6,000-*yuan* rent from each store. The noisy audio/video store has been very troublesome to nearby residents for a long time, but the street office repeatedly ignores their complaints.

In January 2004, the Housing Safety Bureau of Tianjin ordered the two bungalows to be torn down in a month for safety reasons. The street office planned to rebuild two new commercial building there. However, it met with strong opposition from Shiyan residents that had been organized by the committee this time. After considering different opinions from its residents, the committee advocated putting a garden in the space instead of new commercial buildings.

The deputy director of the street office was deeply annoyed by the committee's action.⁸² In the following weeks, the street office tried to persuade the committee to give up its position. However, it quickly found out that the new committee was no not

⁸² Interview with Ms. Jiao Aixia.

as obedient as its predecessor. Eventually, the street office gave up its original plan. For obvious reasons, it also turned down the committee's request for money to build the garden.

This case reveals a different type of relationship between the committee and the street office. Rather than simply following the orders from the street office about the usage of the land, the committee stuck to its position. The street office lost face, first of all, and perhaps even more importantly it lost real financial interests. Grandpa Zhao Fu explained why the street office backed off from its position. From the perspective of ordinary Shiyan residents, the committee was able to organize them into a stronger, more cohesive voice. This forced the street office to re-assess its situation, and to weigh the tradeoff that it would make if it went through with the deal for the commercial buildings and achieved a 12,000-Yuan per year revenue, but then also simultaneously lit the fuse of a possible confrontation with Shiyan residents. The street office was forced to consider what the consequences of such a confrontation would be.

As already mentioned, the Shiyan Committee has a special significance. It has been an experimental case for what direct election would or could look like in Tianjin City. Several very senior administrative officials have been watching the committee closely and have been hoping that the experiment is successful.⁸³ This fact certainly provides both incentives to the street office to cooperate with the committee and a great deal of pressure. The success of the Shiyan experiment therefore had to be viewed as much more of an over-riding interest in the eyes of the street office than the interest it

⁸³ In fact, the experiment in the Shiyan Community has even raised interests from the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

had in simply expanding its revenue base a bit more. This fact of course gave some bargaining leverage to the committee over the dispute, since the street office did not want to do anything that would jeopardize its relationship with the Shiyan Committee or with the administrative higher-ups that were watching the Shiyan experiment with great interest.

Defending Residential Interests from Non-State Actors. The committee has also defended the interests of its residents from non-state organizations, such as real estate developers, construction companies, retailers, taxi companies, etc. I witnessed the whole process of one of these kinds of cases. Grandma Hu had a dispute with the largest real estate development chain in Tianjin City, Shunchi Development, Inc. She wanted the entire 4,000-*yuan* down payment she had made for her apartment back, since Shunchi had sold her an apartment without a land certificate. However, the Shunchi refused to return her money as it blamed her for violating her contract. 4,000 *yuan* is a huge sum of money for a 72-year old lady in China. Grandma Hu had gotten very desperate as she was facing such a powerful real estate company. The Shunchi had even openly derided her by “encouraging” her to file a lawsuit. In China, it cost at least 8,000 *yuan* to hire an attorney for this type of case.

The Shiyan Residents Committee sympathized with Grandma Hu’s situation, and decided to represent her and to negotiate with the company on her behalf. The whole process was very difficult and exhausting, as the company was disdainful of the committee’s capacity from the beginning. In order to achieve this goal, the committee had mobilized various formal and informal influences that it had at its disposal, such as

the local Consumer Association, free legal consultants that it knew of, and even the local police. It had two meetings with the Shunchi agents and made numerous phone calls to the Shunchi leadership. The committee's persistence finally reaped a reward: the company returned 2,500 *yuan* to Grandma Hu.

Participatory management. Without participation from residents, the idea of grassroots self-governance is simply empty talk. Therefore, the Shiyan Residents Committee has treated residential participation as the basis and top priority of all its efforts.⁸⁴ For the committee, participatory management means the establishment of “Four Rights” for ordinary residents: the right to be informed, the right to speak out, the right to participate, and the right to supervise. Ever since its election, the committee has publicly promised to consistently secure and defend these “Four Rights” for its residents.

The first of the Four Rights—the right to be informed—focuses on establishing an openness and transparency with regard to the committee's operations. Financial information about the committee's affairs is readily publicized. The committee posts its financial accounting information at the community billboards every month. It also reports on its financial situation at the semi-annual meetings of the ARR. Furthermore, the committee creates a special column on the major undertakings of the community in its bi-weekly community newsletter, called *Minshen* [Voices of Residents]. Nowadays,

⁸⁴ Interview with Grandpa Liu Jingyu.

the newsletter has become very popular; it has become a great way for ordinary residents to learn about the operations of the committee.⁸⁵

The second of the Four Rights is “the right to speak out.” The way that the committee secures this right to speak out for residents is by encouraging ordinary residents to express their concerns, requests, and criticisms through three channels. Hearings and surveys are employed so as to obtain residents’ opinions on particular issues that are critical to the community, such as how to help seniors, whether to reduce the number of entrances to the community, whether to allow the street office to rebuild the two commercial bungalows, how to remodel the trashcans of each buildings, and how to control pets in the community.

The committee also from time to time holds issue forums where residents can come and talk through the issues with each other and with the committee members. These forums are not necessarily held so as to solve particular issues, though. Instead, they are meant to be informal meetings where the residents and the committee members sit together to discuss things of mutual interest. The committee employs this channel only so as to identify problems in the community.

“Appraisal meetings” are often held during the ARR meetings. These are formal meetings in which the representatives of residents cast votes so as to rate the performances of the committee and social workers. In these meetings, the representatives also have the opportunity to openly ask questions or to raise concerns about any member of the committee or any aspect of the committee’s work.

⁸⁵ The editor of the *Minsheng* Newsletter is Grandpa Wang Hui, the former President of the Tianjin Social Science Academy. The newsletter covers diverse topics related to the community.

The third right is the right to participate, and what this boils down to functionally is the committee guaranteeing opportunities for residents to participate in some aspects of neighborhood management. The committee promises that any resident who wants to contribute to neighborhood affairs will have the opportunity to do so. In addition, all residents are entitled to the services provided by the committee, such as lectures and neighborhood games. It is not difficult for a resident to get to serve as a building leader, a member of a community patrol group or other security group, as a residential representative, or simply as a member of some other diversionary clubs.

Finally, the right to supervise promises every resident the right to monitor the operations of the committee through multiple means. A resident can drop a letter in the suggestion box or visit the committee office in order to have direct discussions with committee members. They can also question the committee during any of the various meetings that have already been mentioned... whether it be during any one of the various ad hoc neighborhood meetings or whether indirectly through representatives during the ARR meetings.

Community Covenant. This was passed in December 2003, and it did several things. It stated the desirability of allowing cultural values to flourish in the Shiyan Community, and it laid out what was considered proper behavior for Shiyan residents. Unlike Western societies that often prioritize individualism, Chinese society primarily relies upon collective identity and norms to determine proper rules of interaction. Therefore, although it is not legally binding, the covenant can be considered a moral contract that establishes what expectations are in terms of ethics for the community. The

covenant is made up of five subject headings which are as follows: community goals, family and traditional Chinese ethics, relations among neighbors, individual behavior, and cultural lives in the community.

The committee sponsored the covenant in order to discourage improper behavior in the community. “We have a few residents whose wallets are swollen, but their ethical standards are lax. They occupy public space, littering, playing loud music, and letting their dogs shit freely. We also have residents that never bother to get to know their neighbors. How can we help each other if we do not even know or trust each other?” said Grandma Liu Baolan. The committee believes that the covenant is helpful for cultivating reciprocal, trusting, and supportive relations among Shiyan residents.

The covenant does not outline specific punishments for any violation. Therefore, its effective impact on the community is rather minor and exists only nominally. However, the covenant itself is a breakthrough, since it symbolizes the gradual emergence of community identity through collective actions. The Shiyan Community has now become more than simply a geographic place where one’s family happens to be, as the Huashan Community arguably is. Conversely, Shiyan residents have started to come out from their individual family cells and have begun to identify themselves with the community. In this sense, the covenant represents a self-governing exploration of collective identity.

Summary

It is easy to discard the explanatory value of the penetrative model when the organization in question openly gives up political assignments like surveillance over

Falun Gong practitioners. There is also no such state-committee collusion as is seen in the Huashan Community. Instead, we find a committee that is capable of publicly defending its interests against its once directly superior entity, the street office. The committee's relative independence derives from the legitimacy of its popular election. The committee identifies itself as the representative of its constituents, and in fact goes so far as to gradually dis-identify itself as merely "an arm of the state."

However, this increasing consciousness as a self-governing organization lends little to the liberal interpretation of events in China. Although the committee has shaken off its political control assignments and is willing to defend the interests of its constituents from the street office, labeling its situation as an instance where we see the civil disobedience model of grassroots political behavior in action would be labeling it incorrectly. Labeling it as such would certainly overestimate the rift that actually exists between the Shiyang Residents Committee and the state. This self-consciousness does not prevent the committee from actively promoting some of the state's initiatives in the arenas of administrative control and service provision. The committee even voluntarily sponsors political education that adds to the legitimacy of the state.

Therefore, neither labeling it a scenario of top-down domination nor a scenario of bottom-up revolt is appropriate for the Shiyang case. Rather, the word "synergy" best characterizes what is happening in the Shiyang Community. indeed, the functions of the Shiyang Residents Committee illustrate even more clearly what has already been discussed in the Dejia case. If the Dejia Residents Committee is in the early stages of establishing a new type of cooperation between the state and ordinary residents, the

Shiyan Residents Committee represents a testimony to what the same kind of process can look like at a later stage.

This chapter has thus far discussed how the four Residents Committees carry out their statutory functions. While it is not feasible to lay out all the details, Table 4-9 summarizes the major function(s) each committee has and the model that best fits and describes them.

Table 4-9: Statutory Functions, Ideal Models, and the Four Residents Committees

Residents Committee	Social control	Administrative service	Self-governing service	Neighborhood self-governance	Models
Jingtai	X				Penetrative
Huashan	XX	X			Corporatist
Dejia	XXX	XXX	XX	X	Synergistic
Shiyan	XXX	X	XXX	XXX	Synergistic

The four committees each display distinctive functionalities inside the contexts of their own communities. The Jingtai Residents Committee is functionally simple and weak, as it does little beyond spying on a few political subjects. The penetrative model appropriately characterizes the committee, as it is no more than an instrument of the state's apparatus of political control.

The Huashan case presents a scenario that is similar to the corporatist story that widely exists in Chinese economic sectors. In this instance, the corporatist connection occurs between the street office and the Huashan Residents Committee. Both closely

work together to explore economic opportunities in the community. Despite very controversial in the eyes of ordinary residents, such an exclusive interest symbiosis also proves to be relatively effective in the area of social control.

A synergistic model is much more useful for discussing and understanding what the Deji and Shiyang Residents Committees are doing. Both have exhibited a relatively strong capacity to carry out a comprehensive list of functions for the benefits of both the state and ordinary residents, although the Deji Residents Committee leans towards administrative service and social control while the Shiyang Residents Committee focuses on self-governance. The two committees evince a possibility of new relationship with the state, which are based less on domination or collusion than on cooperation that spans public-private divisions for mutual enhancement.

The civil disobedience model finds no fit with the four committees. None of them really functions like a “parallel polis” or “street parliament.” Even the Shiyang Residents Committee, with its high level of independence, is still willing to work intensively with the state. Indeed, some of its activities benefit the efficacy and legitimacy of the state, as is demonstrated by the fact of the political education and legal lectures that the committee offers to its residents.

Ultimately, there is no simple conclusion that can be drawn about the operational dynamics that characterize the Residents Committee in contemporary China, as these four cases have demonstrated. These committees play different intermediary roles between the street office and ordinary residents, and therefore, they are best characterized by three different theoretic models. These models point to

different interpretations of state-society relations, which all together are congruent with the multi-faceted reality that is and has been the “China Paradox.” In general, the Jingtai and Huashan cases retain many elements of the traditional type of top-down management dynamic that has characterized Chinese politics for a long time. Indeed, this kind of politicking has been around far longer in China than just since the CCP took over China in 1949. In contrast, the Dejia and Shiyan cases have introduced elements of cooperation to the status quo grassroots hierarchy; and these elements of cooperation have coincided with the economic liberalization and social openness that have characterized China since the late 1970s. The next chapter begins to explore the factors that exist behind the functional diversity of the four committees, and based on that, makes an effort to probe the grassroots state-society relations in urban China.

Neighborhood Politics

Structure and Grassroots State-Society Relations

Chapter Five

Prologue

“Modern (history) is the urbanization of the countryside, not, as among the ancients, the ruralisation of the city” (Marx, 1965). Although this statement was originally made with reference to the social transformation that took place in Western European countries, particularly Germany, in the 17th and 18th Centuries, Marx’s observation is equally applicable to contemporary China. China is a country with a long and splendid history of civilization but has lagged behind Western nations in terms of being on the cutting edge of modern history. A “city” in China has never been anything more than a symbol of political control throughout her long history of mostly agricultural civilization. The tall ramparts and isolated compounds that were once the most recognizable features of Chinese cities were essentially nothing more than symbols of the extension of centralized, authoritarian controls out into the middle of the wide agrarian land and culture that had always been China. Chinese cities were still more or less relics of traditional political control even throughout most of the 20th Century. Tangible ramparts were torn down; yet, intangible ones still pervaded. Numerous separate and self-sufficient state-owned *Danwei*

confined urban residents into various bounding walls. These *Danwei* stifled the vitality of cities, which forced the reform of the late 1970s to begin in the countryside again.⁸⁶

A key consequence of the current Dengist reform has been the abolition of various tangible and intangible “walls” that previously constrained China’s development. Because of the massive construction that has come along with the abolishment of these “walls,” Chinese cities are experiencing unprecedented growth. Population, capital, demand, openness, and many other elements of industrial civilization are quickly becoming concentrated into cities. In contrast, the old monotype of state penetration which has always dominated the affairs of cities in China is being uprooted, as the *Danwei* system has gradually dissolved since the late 1980s. Birth control, crime, the floating population, urban unemployment, social welfare, civil disputes and many more such challenges have created a situation where the various urban communities as well as local governments—particularly the street office—have come under tremendous pressure. This changing situation calls for new models of governance at the urban grassroots level. Understanding this background is imperative for understanding the Residents Committee and the urban grassroots state-society relationship in China. With this large picture in mind, this chapter first attempts to explain the functional diversity that was found in the four committees in Chapter Four, and then draws inferences about the grassroots state-society relationship in contemporary China.

⁸⁶ The first revolution led by the CCP to found the PRC in 1949 took the historically unprecedented form of harnessing the revolutionary energies of the peasantry in the countryside to “surround and overwhelm” the “conservative” cities. The latest reform since 1978, “Reform and Openness,” is believed as the second revolution. Interestingly, it started from the countryside again.

History, Personal Factors, and Functional Diversity

The four Residents Committees discussed in Chapter Four displayed distinctive functionalities in addition to some similarities. This section examines how the observed patterns can be explained by the committee's history and personal factors, such as professionalism and leadership style.

History as an Explanation

As an organization that has been witness to more than five decades of history, the path traveled by the Residents Committee affects the way the landscape of its operations looks today.

Social Control. This is perhaps the area where these four committees have kept the closest conformity with their histories. History shows that social control was established as the over-riding priority of the committee since its creation. It is clear that the four committees all still actively perform this function today, although their agendas are different. The Jingtai Residents Committee focuses exclusively on political control, and therefore it is mostly consistent with the traditional type of the penetrative committee that had been the norm in China before the Dengist reform. Political surveillance is also carried out effectively in the Huashan and Deji Residents Committees. The Shiyan Residents Committee, contrastingly, spends negligible energy on political control. However, it is very active in participating in administrative control measures that are in keeping with the state's social control agenda.

History also persists insofar as many old social control techniques are still employed today, such as neighborhood security patrols, relying upon peers for information, and screening and identifying potentially troublesome issues and persons, etc.

Administrative Service Provision. Besides social control, service provision represents another area where the four committees display a certain degree of overlap. History can partially account for it. As Grandma Liu Baolan, a veteran that has been a member of the Shiyuan Residents Committee for more than three decades, told me, the committee in the 1950s and early 1960s was responsible for some administrative services such as poverty relief, donation, neighborhood cleanup, and campaigns against superstition. Although those services were greatly reduced in the wake of several political campaigns, they persisted even through the more extremely politicized periods like the Cultural Revolution (Salaff, 1971).

In general, history can account for some of the functional similarities that can be seen across the four committees, but it explains little about the differences. The Jingtai and Huashan Residents Committees were established in the reform era, and even the other two committees—that had much longer histories—were so dramatically reshuffled in 1997 that they were hardly the same committees as before. This project aims to understand contemporary neighborhood politics. What can account for the difference between the traditional penetrative model of committee operation and the diverse models we find today? The historical approach can say little in this regard.

There are several particularly important puzzles that have been left unsolved. Why has the Jingtai Residents Committee—which has had absolutely no experience of

totalitarian history—developed the greatest conformity to the old political model? What explains the corporatist collusion in the Huashan Community? Finally, what accounts for the functional differences between the Dejia and Shiyang Residents Committees, which have almost identical histories? The explanations cannot be singularly extracted from history, and they must come from elsewhere.

Personal Factors as Explanations

One place to look is at the personal characteristics that are often used to explain organizational performance. This project examines two such characteristics, professionalism and leadership style.

Professionalism. The Residents Committee has been witness to dramatic improvement in this area in the reform era (Table 5-1). The pre-reform committee was often joked about as being a group of mostly jobless and illiterate housewives in their sixties, and they were called “tootsie grandma” [*xiaojiao laotai*]. Now, the average age of members in all four committees is below fifty.⁸⁷ There are even several members that are in their early thirties. In addition, the education level has significantly increased. Most members are high school graduates and some even have college degrees.

⁸⁷ The members in the Shiyang Residents Committee are directly elected through ordinary residents. In the Shiyang Community, being old is actually an advantage to take positions in the committee. Unlike those younger residents who have to struggle for a living, those seniors have plenty of spare time. Therefore, they are more willing to participate in neighborhood activities.

Table 5-1: Professionalism across the Four Residents Committees

	Jingtai	Huashan	Dejia	Shiyan	Shiyan (Social workers)
Average age	46.3	47.3	46.8	69.4	46.5
Average level of education⁸⁸	4	3.6	3.4	4.4	4.5
Average years of experience	2 (4.3) ⁸⁹	3.1	5.2	1.8 (5) ⁹⁰	4.7

Can age or education account for the functional disparity found between the four committees? Unfortunately looking at the age factor—which shows virtually no differences between then four committees—cannot help. The education factor likewise helps little. There is also no consistent pattern between a committee’s functions and its members’ level of education. For example, if education accounted for good performance in the Shiyan case, it could not explain either bad performance in Jingtai case with roughly equal level of education or good performance in the Dejia case with the lowest education level.

Table 5-1 also enlists the average work experience of each committee as a whole. The Dejia and Shiyan members are more experienced than the members of the other two committees. Chalmers Johnson, Robert Wade, Peter Evans, and other developmentalists have long argued that the expertise from a long-term career is a key factor which can explain developmental performance in certain countries (Evans, 1995; Johnson, 1982;

⁸⁸ The scale is assigned as follows: illiterate – 1; elementary – 2; middle school – 3; high school – 4; college – 5.

⁸⁹ Two members had worked many years in other Residents Committees before they joined the Jingtai Residents Committee in 2002. The number in the parentheses accounts for their previous experiences.

⁹⁰ Among the current five members, only Grandma Liu Baolan had work experience as a former committee member. However, the other four members are experienced as they had actively participated in neighborhood activities as building leaders, leader of neighborhood security patrol team, or residential representatives. The number in the parentheses accounts for their pre-election experience.

Wade, 1990). One would think that this idea would be equally applicable to the committee. Longer experience often implies better acquaintance with neighborhood affairs and better working skills, which would be valuable assets for those interested in being committee members to have.

This factor can partially account for the performance of the Dejia and Shiyang committees vis-à-vis the Jingtai: the first two committees have rather comprehensive functions while the latter has no real function but political surveillance. The experience factor offers no explanation for the differences between the Dejia and Shiyang cases, however. It also cannot explain why the Huashan Residents Committee has taken on more functions than the Jingtai Residents Committee when the former is 'less-experienced' than the latter. More importantly, it still cannot explain why a committee chooses specific function(s), given its members' work experiences. For example, even though the Jingtai Residents Committee is the least experienced, why does it select political surveillance rather than administrative service? Why has it achieved little progress after two years of its creation?

The Leadership Style. Like professionalism, leadership matters for organizational performance as well. Let's start by discussing Ms. Li Lan of the Dejia Residents Committee and her very well-developed leadership style.

Ms. Li Lan has eight years of experience in working with the Residents Committees, seven of them having been spent with the Dejia committee. She has very detailed preferences and very strong resolve, as exemplified by her actions in the earlier-recounted story of the dispute with the Tianjin No. 1 Resting House. She is also a leader

who has a sense of responsibility. Whatever requirements she sets for her subordinates, she meets and exceeds first on her own. For example, she is on duty during the two-hour noon break from Monday to Friday, so that others can go home to prepare dinner for their families. This amounts to her working ten hours of overtime in a week, which is twice the amount of overtime that the other committee members work during the weekend.

The comparison between Ms. Li Lan and Ms. Gong Pei from the Jingtai Residents Committee is telling. Ms. Gong Pei had no experience in neighborhood affairs before she took charge of the Jingtai committee in 2002. Her college degree and younger age have helped her little, as she ultimately lacks commitment to her job. This fact was not hard to surmise. There was a week she completely missed when I studied in her committee, and she monopolizes fiscal operations, such as can be seen in the shady way that she was responsible for leasing out office space. It is fair to say that Ms. Gong Pei sets a bad example for her committee members and for Jingtai residents. Ms. Han Xue once complained, “In Jingtai [Residents Committee] we have lots of spare time. However, I would rather work in my former committee. I was always very busy there, but I felt pleased. Here, I have nothing to do, but dawdling.”

Many agree that the Deji Residents Committee would not have achieved so many things without Ms. Li Lan’s strong leadership, as exemplified by the comprehensive security network and the Starlight Senior Center. Perhaps her deepest mark has been made in that she has attempted to shape the committee into a “Service Committee,” which sharply contrasts with the Jingtai Residents Committee.

Notable though this is, however, it does not directly help to answer the central questions of this project. For example, why did Ms. Li Lan choose “Service Committee” rather than self-governance as the linchpin ideal for her committee? How can we explain the similar performance and achievements of the Shiyan Residents Committee where no such a charismatic leader exists? Indeed, Ms. Li Lan’s leadership style is not the only effective way to run a committee. In thinking about the successful businesses managed by the Huashan Residents Committee in that impoverished neighborhood, one cannot doubt the leadership ability of its previous director(s). Similarly, no one would question the leadership quality present in the Shiyan Residents Committee. All five members of that committee retired from leading positions in organizations much larger than a committee. However, they chose to focus on neighborhood self-governance.

In terms of analysis, the elements of history and personal factors are useful for discussing some similarities, but neither of them is sufficient for providing systematic explanations for the diverse functionalities that have been observed to exist across the four committees. Both explanations concentrate on the committee itself, yet they essentially ignore the structural settings that surround the committee, i.e., they do not discuss its unique position as an intermediary between local governments and ordinary residents. As the next section will show, structural factors have a much more systematic and stronger effect on the function(s) committees can have than the factors that have already discussed.

Structural Relations Behind Functional Diversity

This section treats the sandwich-structure of neighborhood politics as an integral system consisting of three organic elements: the state (which for the purposes of this project is best represented by the street office), the Residents Committee, and residents (including individuals and other neighborhood organizations). The upper and lower layers of the sandwich are discussed separately, followed by a holistic examination.

State–Residents Committee Structure

China has a long tradition of being ruled by a strong state, which has been greatly expanded and fine-tuned in the new Republic. The Residents Committee is one channel that the state can use to impose its will in cities. In recent history, an intimate relationship has consistently existed between the committees and the street office. In fact, the committee's functions were exclusively defined by the street office in the pre-reform era. Since then, at least three prominent dimensions have arisen that can be examined that are pertinent to the contemporary state of the relationship between the street office and the committee.

Personnel Management. The hiring and firing of committee members and staff used to be the most effective means by which the street office exercised its control over the Residents Committee. The situation has now begun to change.

Creation of the Residents Committee. The Weifang Street Office created the Jingtai Residents Committee in a rather traditional way by directly appointing its three members. None of them are Jingtai residents. Ms. Han Xue recounted to me the story of her first days in the community. “We were like paratroopers, have landed here but knowing nobody.

They [residents] knew nothing about us, either. We were baseless and that gave us a lot of trouble,” she said.

The Meiyuan Street Office adopted a more decentralized approach with regard to the Huashan Residents Committee. It only designated one of its employees as the director of the committee. The director then selected the rest of his members, upon the approval of the street office. The idea was to leave the director the full discretion to assemble a team that could do businesses with him effectively.⁹¹

According to the regulations of the Pudong Street Office (vis-à-vis the Dejie and Shiyuan Residents Committees), all of its committees have to be elected indirectly or directly by local residents. In the Dejie community, the street office nominates the candidates before they have been approved by the Dejie residential representatives in a single-candidate election. The Shiyuan Residents Committee before 2003 followed the same procedure. However, in the recent direct election, individual Shiyuan residents nominated and eventually voted in all five members of the committee on their own, with no intermediary representatives involved.

Management over the Director of the Residents Committee. The directors in the Jingtai, Huashan, and Dejie Residents Committees are all state employees who came from the respective street offices in charge. This was not a common practice before the 1980s, since a state employee costs more.⁹² The Meiyuan adopted this practice in the mid-1980s. The primary goal of this was to enhance the business activities of those committees

⁹¹ The street office set the profit goal for each committee and then held its director accountable.

⁹² Interview with Mr. Zhao Tong, the director of the Meiyuanzhuang Street Office.

through their own officers. The Huashan Residents Committee even temporarily had two street officers acting as director and assistant director in 1992.⁹³

The Weifang and Pudong Street Offices adopted the same practice, but for a quite different reason. All the street offices in Tianjin City were ordered to cut down the size of their overly large staffs in the mid-1990s. Instead of firing these redundant officers, the street offices found many covert ways to resettle them. Sending them down to the Residents Committees was one of the solutions employed by the Weifang and Pudong Street Offices.⁹⁴

The Pudong Street Office often keeps its committee directors tenured for a long time. For example, Ms. Li Lan has worked on the Dejie Residents Committee for seven years. Ms. Liu Shufang was the director of the Shiyuan Residents Committee for more than eight years, until the direct election of committee members took place in 2003.⁹⁵ On the other hand, the Weifang Street Office rotates its sending-down directors every three years. This policy leaves more control in the hands of the street office, but it may also prevent those directors from fully engaging the concerns of their neighborhoods, since they are only temporarily stationed.

Finally, the Shiyuan Residents Committee deserves particular attention with regards to this subject, since it has employed direct election as a means of staffing its committee.

⁹³ That was not successful, as they could not cooperate together. The assistant director was then moved away from the committee.

⁹⁴ They were still state employees, but working in the committees rather than in the street offices.

⁹⁵ Ms. Liu Shufang became the director of the Shiyuan Social Work Station (SWS), an organization under the dual leadership of the Pudong Street Office and the newly directly elected committee. The SWS is discussed shortly.

Its director, Grandpa Zhao Fu, is not a street office employee and thus the Pudong Street Office has little ability to control him.

Fiscal Structure. According to the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees (Article 17), local governments need to provide necessary financial support to the Residents Committees, including stipends and operating budget.

Stipend. Since the committee is considered a mass organization, the local Bureau of Civil Affairs only pays small amount of stipend to members of the committee.⁹⁶ In 2003, the monthly stipend for Jingtai and Huashan members was 300 *yuan*, the standard level set by the Tianjin Municipal Government.⁹⁷ In addition to that, the Pudong Street Office paid an extra 150 *yuan* per month to its committee members to reward their hard work. The money for this comes from the street office's operating budget. The current members of the Shiyan Residents Committee receive no stipend at all, since they consider themselves to be volunteers working for their neighbors.

Operating Budget. This money comes from the street office as well, and lately has been very much insufficient. The Weifang and Pudong Street Offices each provided 450 *yuan* per month to their committees in 2003. The Meiyuan Street Office gave only 370 *yuan* per month.

The street offices also impose different restrictions regarding the usage of the money they provide to the committees. The Jingtai Residents Committee needs to get approval from the Weifang Street Office for any spending item that costs more than 50

⁹⁶ The directors of the Jingtai, Huashan, and Deji Residents Committees get salaries as government employees, which are often four times higher than stipends paid for other committee members.

⁹⁷ The minimum living standard was 450 *yuan* per month in Tianjin City in 2003.

yuan. The Pudong Street Office only approves those spending items of 200 *yuan* or more. The Shiyuan Residents Committee is treated differently, however. It gets its operating budget on a lump-sum basis and is not required to report on how it is used to the Pudong Street Office. The Huashan Residents Committee has a similar amount of discretion to the Shiyuan Residents Committee regarding the usage of operating funds from the street office. Neither does it need to get pre-approval for all of its spending decisions.

Profit. This aspect of the relationship between the street office and committee applies to the Huashan Residents Committee only. According to the profit-sharing plan that was discussed in Chapter Four, the Huashan Residents Committee only retained forty percent of the profit it generated from neighborhood businesses. There were a few members who complained that the committee should receive a larger share. However, nearly all committee members appreciated the Meiyuan Street Office for honoring the promised sharing plan.⁹⁸ The committee enjoyed a high level of independence regarding the distribution of the profit in hand, and this fact is part of what made the committee happy overall with their forty percent of profit share.

Division of Labor. The Organic Law applies to the Residents Committee's self-governing status, which technically only subjects them to the guidance of the street office rather than to directly following its orders. The street offices unfortunately treat the committees as if just the opposite were the case. This tradition still persists, but at different levels of intensity today.

⁹⁸ Interview with Grandma Liu Jiafeng.

The Weifang Street Office simply adheres to the old practices. The street office allocates assignments and the Jingtai Residents Committee has to execute them immediately. In contrast, the Pudong Street Office took two measures to reduce burdens of its committees in 2003. First, it redefined four types of activities: (1) activities for the street office only; (2) activities that require cooperation from the committees; (3) activities for the committees only; and (4) activities that should be handled by private or other intermediary organizations. Second, instead of allowing all sections of the street office to communicate with the committees directly, the street office centralized this power into the residential section of the street office. All other sections that needed assistance or cooperation from the committees should submit their requests to the residential section first. The residential section would then allocate all of what it considered to be reasonable requests to the committees. These two measures proved to be popular. Although there have been many inadequacies in implementation, nearly all the committee members I interviewed admitted to seeing a reduction in the number of assignments from the street office.

The division of labor situation as far as the Meiyuan Street Office is concerned is very complicated. It has provided various measures of fiscal assistance to the Huashan Residents Committee, but it has largely refrained from intervening the committee's business decisions. In this area, it has established a clear division of labor with the committee. However, the committee has received very little authority or independence in other areas. As is the case with the Jingtai Residents Committee, the Huashan Residents Committee has to follow the orders from the street office. There are more than ten

operational sections that make up the street office, such as the civil affairs section, the education section, the family planning section, etc. Each section can directly give orders to the committee. This scenario is typical in urban China, where the committee is simply treated as “a cheap arm” of the street office.⁹⁹

So in summation, the street office-Residents Committee structure relationship frames the way that the will of the state is channeled into each community. It also specifies and defines the manner in which a committee can respond to top-down influence.

Generally speaking, the street office maintains a strong influence over the committees; and this influence seems to be important to local governments entities like the street office in that it allows them to carry out the imperatives of the state that they receive from above.

However, the degrees of control maintained over the Residents Committees vary from one street office to the next. The Weifang Street Office has the most centralized control over the Jingtai Residents Committee in all three areas mentioned above (i.e., personal management, fiscal structure, division of labor). In contrast, the Huashan and Deji Residents Committees enjoy a more decentralized situation where they are allotted more decision-making power and somewhat lighter workloads. The Huashan Residents Committee has acquired significant independence with regard to its business operations. It was able to make decisions regarding its personnel, its operating budget, and usage of the profits it retained. The Pudong Street Office has further decentralized its power to its

⁹⁹ Mr. Cao Hui at the Huashan Residents Committee used it to describe his situation. He complained several times about the arbitrariness and arrogance of the Meiyuanzhuang Street Office. Right now, the various sections in the street office give his committee too many assignments, which contributes at least seventy percent of the committee's workload, according to him.

committees by clarifying responsibilities and restructuring its connections with the committees.

Finally, it is interesting to compare the Dejia and Shiyang Residents Committees to each other. The Pudong Street Office still maintains the means to exercise direct and comprehensive influence over the Dejia Residents Committee, despite the fact that it has allowed for a significant degree of decentralization. In contrast, its influence over the Shiyang Residents Committee is indirect and weak. Members of the Shiyang Residents Committee are directly elected, not appointed by the street office. None of them are state employees, and therefore subject little to the street office's authority. They do not even receive a stipend from the street office. All of these differences contribute to the Shiyang Residents Committee having the highest level of independence of all the four committees.

Resident-Residents Committee Structure

This is the bottom layer of the earlier-mentioned sandwich structure, where equally distinctive patterns of interaction can be found across the four committees.

Structural Relations in the Jingtai Community. Despite its affluence, the Jingtai Community is rather simply structured. Its structure includes primarily the committee, the HPMC, and ordinary residents (Figure 5-1). The committee and ordinary Jingtai residents have a one-dimensional, vertical, and strained relationship. Jingtai residents did not appreciate the arrival of the committee and its activities. They even feel uneasy about the committee's official color. Despite this however, the Weifang Street Office insisted on establishing the committee for the purpose of managing the nearly three thousand Jingtai residents. The relationship was rocky even from the beginning, but what ultimately soured

the committee-resident relationship was the dispute that erupted over the committee's current two-level office, which was originally designed to be part of the community entertainment center. Currently, the committee pays no rent and other utility bills for its occupancy there. Jingtai residents and the HPMC complain that the committee covertly seized their property, because they paid the building costs and have since paid the maintenance fees of the office. However, complaining is the only course of action that they have been able to undertake so far.¹⁰⁰

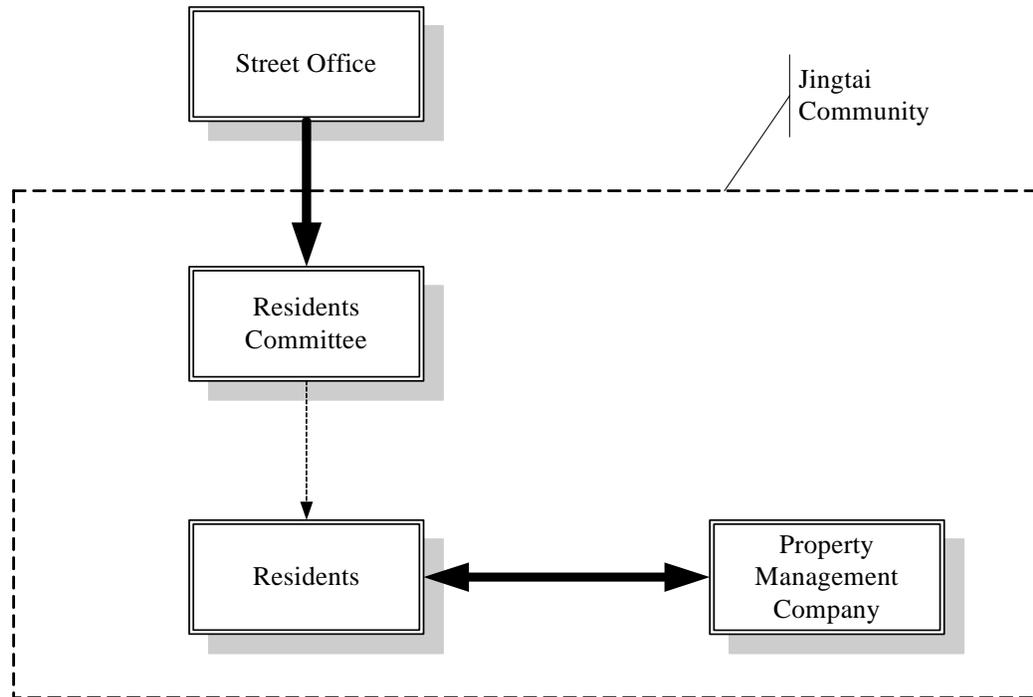


Figure 5-1: Structural Relations in the Jingtai Community

¹⁰⁰ According to the building code in the Tianjin Real Estate Development, all residential communities must leave certain space for the Residents Committee.

Ostensibly, the committee has had very hard time with its residents ever since its controversial establishment. There are several reasons for this in addition to those that have been mentioned so far. None of the committee members are local residents, and several incidents that have come to pass since the committee's establishment have made the situation even worse. For example, the Weifang Street Office has constantly used the committee's office for meetings and entertainment events that have had no connection with the community. Jingtai residents have loathed these activities, as they have perceived them to be intrusions into their private community. In another case, the street office decided to use part of the committee's office space for storing donated clothes and quilts for an earthquake relief effort that was undertaken to assist Gansu Province in 2003. These donations were mostly used items that had been collected from other communities. This act elicited complaints from many of the Jingtai residents, as they worried that the donations would contain the bacteria that spread SARS.¹⁰¹

As a result, the committee has never won recognition or earned legitimacy from its residents. It even fails to find enough neighborhood activists to fill its twelve building leader positions. Without neighborhood activists, the committee's ability to connect with ordinary residents is fragile and fractured. Nobody should expect the committee to achieve anything spectacular while it is attempting to deal with thousands of residents alone. A further consequence of this situation is that the weak linkage between the committee and its residents greatly dilutes and compromises the capacity of the Weifang Street Office to exercise its prerogatives of top-down control.

¹⁰¹ SARS stands for the Severe Acute Respiratory Disease, which was prevalent at that time in China.

The difficult relationship between residents and the committee is further weakened because of the strong ties between residents and the Huaxia Property Management Company (HPMC). Each Jingtai household pays a monthly property-managing fee of roughly seventy *yuan* to the HPMC. In exchange, the company provides housing maintenance, 24-hour security, neighborhood cleaning, and other services to the residents. Similar services are often carried out though the committees in other less affluent communities. The Jingtai Residents Committee hence loses important opportunities to interact with its constituents by bequeathing these services to the HPMC.

The HPMC was established two years earlier than the Jingtai committee, and the services it is responsible for are delivered quite professionally. Largely because of this the HPMC has established a stable and relatively good relationship with most Jingtai residents over the past four years. Their relationship has even gradually expanded to include some non-business interactions, interactions which again could and should perhaps exist between the committee and its residents. For example, some residents now contact the HPMC for many emergencies, and some of these ‘emergencies’ (like those which involve neighborhood disputes) are clearly beyond the capacity of the company to handle. The HPMC is often responsive to most of these requests, however. It hopes to ‘indigenize’ itself in the eyes of Jingtai residents so that it may become a familiar fixture of the community. Perhaps this is a difficult objective for the HPMC given the fact that it is part of a nationwide management chain, but a good relationship with residents makes it easier

to collect the monthly maintenance fee from them, which is often a problem in many other affluent communities.¹⁰²

The HMPC attempts to find its way into the good graces in other ways, as well. It has made arrangements with the local police station to help residents change their identification cards, and, in addition, the HMPC has held a Mid-Autumn Festival Party to entertain local residents since 2001. This party has become a joy-filled tradition of the community, so perhaps in looking at this particular instance the HMPC is succeeding in its efforts to indigenize itself. To hold something like the Mid-Autumn Party would be totally beyond both the fiscal and organizational capacities of the Jingtai Committee. The cost for the 2003 party alone was more than 40,000 *yuan*, nearly ten times the annual operating budget of the committee.

In general, the HPMC and Jingtai residents have developed a horizontal relationship that is fundamentally different from the traditional top-down penetration type of relationship that can often characterize interactions between the state and ordinary residents in China. This new kind of lateral relationship—which is essentially based upon the market principle of economic exchange—greatly weakens residents' potential ties with the committee. It even wipes out possibility for the committee to repair its thin and strenuous relationship with Jingtai residents.

In the end, this kind of 'horizontal connection' seems to have become the only viable kind of connection that can exist between residents and any other entity inside the Jingtai community. In the present context there is almost no interest overlap between the

¹⁰² Interview with Mr. Zhu Jun, the manager of the HMPC at the Jingtai Community.

committee and its constituents, which greatly compresses the committee's functional space. This has basically resulted in a status quo situation where the committee has been marginalized and has become irrelevant, impotent, and even troublesome to the community.

Structural Relations in the Huashan Community. The Huashan Residents Committee is the power center of the Huashan Community, unlike the Jingtai Residents Committee which ostensibly has to deal with a competitor like the HPMC, (Figure 5-2).¹⁰³ The Huashan Residents Committee has to take care of a variety of residential affairs, which provides plenty of opportunities for the committee to cultivate dense and favored relations with its constituents. However, the relations in the Huashan Community between residents and the committee are much more antagonistic and tense even than those in the Jingtai Community.

As a de facto business entity, the Huashan Residents Committee faces lots of resistance from ordinary residents. In order to implement the state's policies, the committee has to heavily rely upon neighborhood activists. In contrast to the strained relationship that it has with ordinary residents, the committee has built close ties with neighborhood activists—mainly with building leaders and those participating in its business operations. Although there are some activists whose primary goal is to help their neighbors, the reputation of neighborhood activists in general is negative, as many residents feel that they are not “clean,” or that they have impure motives for attempting to help them. It is not a secret that these activists periodically receive cash, living items, and

¹⁰³ The discussion about the Huashan case covers the period until 2003.

gifts from the committee. Some activists bring their relatives or friends to work in neighborhood businesses, much to the consternation of residents. There are even few activists who directly run businesses with the resource support encouragement of the committee. For example, the gaming center was owned by a building leader who happened to be a relative of a former deputy director in the street office.

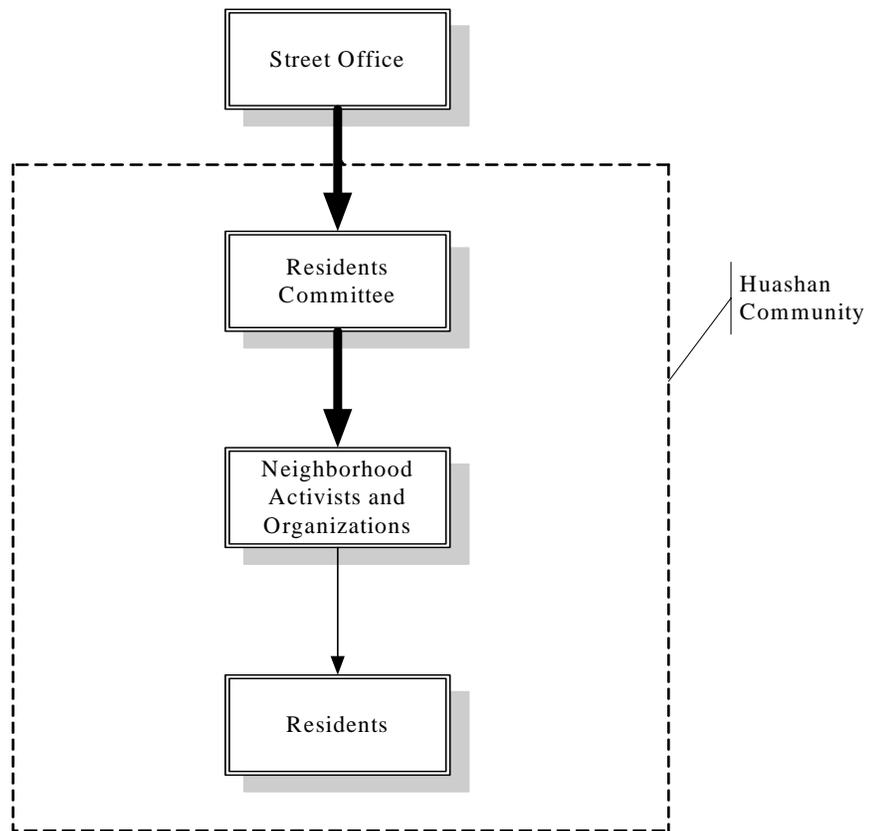


Figure 5-2: Structural Relations in the Huashan Community (1985-1999)

The committee's close relationship with neighborhood activists has contributed to effective governance in some areas of committee functionality, however, such as is the case regarding family planning policy. As is *not* the case with the isolated Jingtai Residents

Committee, neighborhood activists in the Huashan Community greatly enhance the committee's capacity for collecting information and execute policies.

The dispatch security unit established in 1999 further strengthens the committee's social control efforts (Figure 5-3). Although the unit answers directly to the police station and has no formal relationship with the committee, both organizations work intensely together to promote the interests of the state. As the result of its dense connection with neighborhood activists and the dispatch security unit, the committee has even been designated as an exemplar in the Meiyuan Street Office for its good performance in both the areas of business and social control.

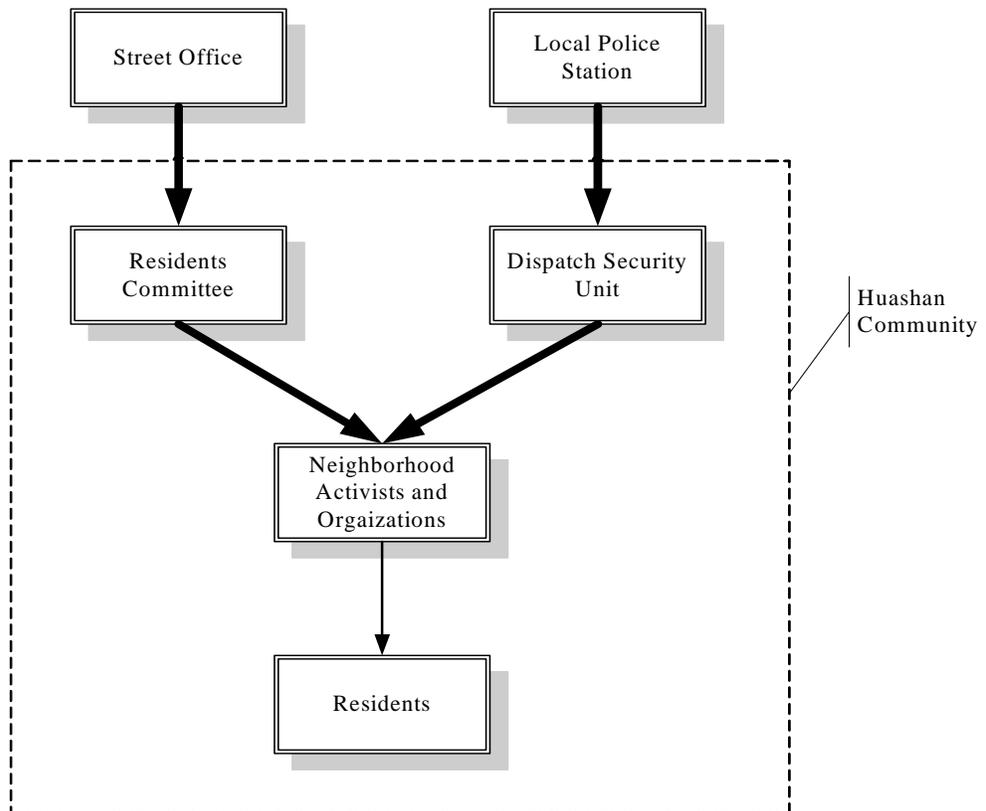


Figure 5-3: Structural Relations in the Huashan Community (1999-2003)

Huashan residents have tried to express their discontentment in a few different ways. They often write letters of disclosure and get into verbal skirmishes with the committee, but none of them had any real impact until the explosion that occurred on May 1, 2003.

The incident began because of a decision made by the street office to build a road that would run through the community to a nearby newly developed luxury living compound.¹⁰⁴ The proposed road would have cut the community in half in addition to bringing noise, pollution, and insecurity to the community. The street office never attempted to consult Huashan residents, and so to the moderate surprise of the committee, the decision inspired the community and residents to block the plan. The street office did nothing to mollify the situation. Instead—as usual—it posted warning posters, and the committee began trying to “educate” its residents to back off. On May 1, the International Labor Day, a few officers from the street office, accompanied by the Huashan committee members, visited the community to issue an ultimatum. Their attitudes only ended up fanning the flames. Violence broke out after a grandma fainted because of anger.¹⁰⁵ Agitated residents beat the director of the street office, and for two hours they also laid siege to the office of the committee, where the street officials and committee members had retreated to. This went on for nearly two hours until the police arrived and broke up the mob of residents.

This incident raised great concern from the municipality, as it worried that similar kinds of riots would spread. The municipality quickly shut down the road project and

¹⁰⁴ As a return, the real estate developer agreed to “donate” some apartments to the street officials.

¹⁰⁵ She died later in hospital.

punished the street office. A vice director responsible for the road project was dismissed. The street office was also ordered to give 30,000 *yuan* to the family of the grandma who died in the hospital later as a result of a heart attack. Upon the request of ordinary residents, all of the committee members were dismissed. All of the businesses that were run under the auspices of the committee were either dissolved or taken over by the street office. The new committee has been prohibited from engaging in any business activity.¹⁰⁶

The incident ended as a tragedy for both the committee and ordinary residents. The ripple effects of the riot still trouble the new committee, which is now led by Mr. Cao Hui. “ ‘Rome is not built in one day’ [*bingdong sanchi, fei yiri zhihan*]. When you scarified the interests of residents, why should they let you off quickly?” said he.

Structural Relations in the Dejia Community. At first glance, the structural relationship between residents and the committee in the Dejia Community looks like a combination of those seen in the Huashan and Jingtai Communities (Figure 5-4). In one sense, the Dejia Community processes a similar vertical power chain to the Huashan Community, which (to-to-bottom) links the street office, the committee, neighborhood activists and organizations, and ordinary residents. In another sense, though, the linkage from residents to residential representatives functions a parallel power chain, which is somewhat similar to the horizontal connection between the HPMC and residents in the Jingtai Community.

However, a closer examination reveals a different story. Let’s begin by examining the Assembly of Residential Representatives (ARR), the highest authority in the Dejia

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the municipality has banned such activities since 1997. The district government felt very angry to learn that the Meiyuanzhuang Street Office still allowed such things.

Community. As is the case in a situation of separated legislative and executive power, the ARR makes decisions for the committee to execute.

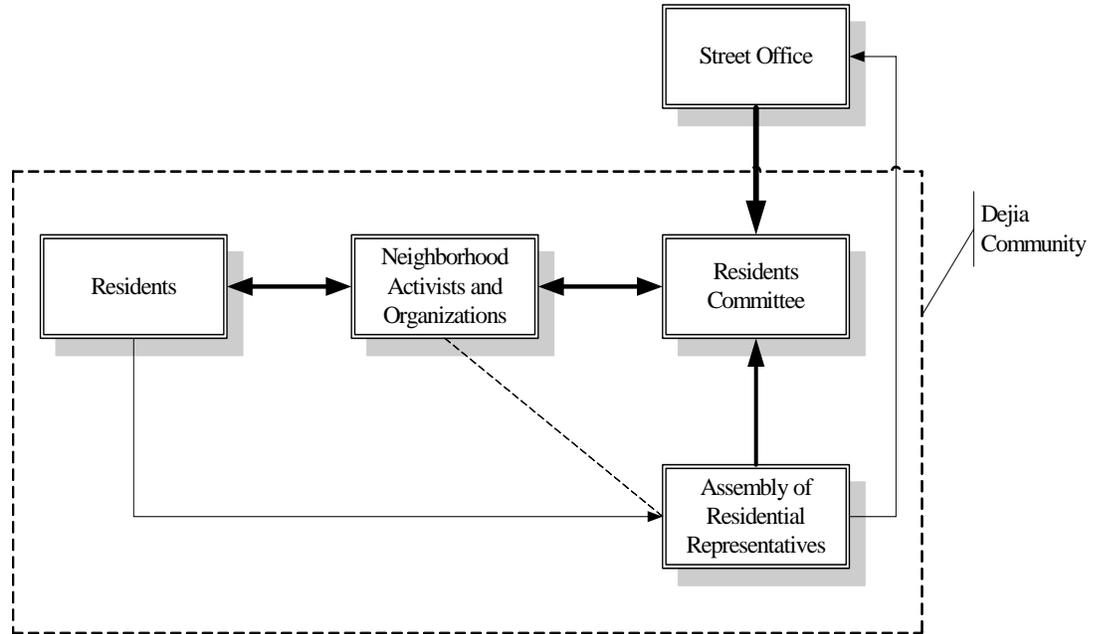


Figure 5-4: Structural Relations in the Deji Community

The ARR in the Deji Community has ninety-eight members. It is convened twice a year to evaluate the performance of the committee and each committee member. It also discusses the committee's work plan for the coming half year and other issues it deems important. I attended an ARR in July 2004. Ninety-five representatives were present at the meeting. The committee even invited some locally prominent political figures to the meeting, including two representatives of the People's Congress of Tianjin City and Director Wang Yun from the Pudong Street Office.

All committee members treated the ARR very seriously.¹⁰⁷ The Pudong Street Office states in its policy that any committee member who fails to receive sixty percentages of the votes during the ARR will be dismissed. If the committee itself receives less than a sixty percent vote of confidence, then the director of the committee is removed from his/her post. Although the Dejia Residents Committee has received a no-confidence vote as such, they have happened in the other committees.¹⁰⁸ The ARR, therefore, becomes the key institution for holding the committee accountable in the Dejia Community.

Members of the ARR from all thirteen communities in the Pudong Street are also invited to evaluate the performance of the various sections of the Pudong Street Office on an annual basis. Although their evaluation has only suggestive value, different sections of the street office still feel pressure to avoid negative evaluations.¹⁰⁹

Unlike the HPMC that keeps no connection to the Jingtai Residents Committee, the ARR in the Dejia Community acts a bridge between ordinary residents and the committee: residents can impose certain controls over the committee and can even influence the street office through the ARR. This arguably more balanced and accountable bottom-up structure is distinct from the domineering top-down structures found in both the Jingtai and Huashan Communities.

The neighborhood activists and organizations in the Dejia Community also differ sharply from those of the Huashan Community. First, they work for the committee on a volunteer basis, not because of any kinds of economic incentive. They cooperate with the

¹⁰⁷ I spent a whole weekend to help Ms. Zhao Chunhui and Wang Xiaomin to prepare their working reports.

¹⁰⁸ The street office usually will not dismiss those committee members with low evaluation scores immediately. Instead, it transfers them to other communities for a second chance.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Ms. Jiao Aixia.

committee because they want to serve their neighbors. The committee does not “buy” these activists into its favor. Rather, it has to win consent from them in terms of what it wants them to do. Second, there are some neighborhood organizations that operate in a distinct place between the committee and ordinary residents in the Deji Community, such as the YMCA and other diversionary clubs. Although they sometimes receive support from the committee, ultimately these organizations operate independently of it. The voluntary neighborhood activists and independent organizations set a tone of cooperation, not domination, in the Deji Community. The committee is more like a partner than a commander as it deals with neighborhood activists and organizations.

In general, there are dense, pluralized, and reciprocal linkages between the committee and Deji residents, which are channeled through the ARR, neighborhood activists, and organizations. They sharply contrast with the thin, discrete, and displaced relationship between residents and the committee in the Jingtai Community, and also with the exclusive, one-dimensional, and contentious relationship found in the Huashan Community.

It is important not to understate or to give short shrift to the intricacy of the Deji power structure. It truly is a remarkable and complex affair. It is clear that the committee is subject to both the influence of the street office and ordinary residents (through the ARR). The power balance between these two entities is, however, asymmetric. The horizontal connection that exists between Deji residents and the committee does not necessarily imply that there has been a zero-sum decrease in the amount of vertical sovereign control that the Pudong Street Office can exercise over residents. Although the

ARR evaluates the annual performance of the street office, its impact on the operation of the street office is minimal at best. The street office can act with little constraint from the ARR.

In addition, the impact of the actions of the Deji Residents Committee on ordinary residents is more significant than the effect of the residents on the committee. Ordinary residents can best influence the committee through the ARR, but they do not handpick the representatives that take place in the ARR. Instead, members of the ARR are often those neighborhood activists who are invited by the committee to serve in the ARR (Figure 5-4). Since the committee has won recognition from these activists over the years, it is able to maintain an intimate relationship with most of those who participate in the ARR. It is certainly not the case that the committee manipulates the ARR, but any oversight authority that it has over the committee must be understood in the context of the kind of relationship that exists between the ARR and the committee. Additionally, the ARR only meets twice a year, which compromises its decision-making capacity.

These facts add a new and important facet to what has been discussed thus far as the overall structural dynamic of local governance in the Deji Community. While an elements of cooperation is certainly a key characteristic of the structural relationship between residents and the committee in Deji, the committee is still the *de facto* power center. It makes the actual decisions and then executes them. The power balance still leans towards the committee rather than towards ordinary residents.

Structural Relations in the Shiyan Community. The committee-residents structural relationship in the Shiyan Community is very similar in many ways to that of the

Dejia Community. This is true insofar that in Shiyang such things are found as an ARR and voluntary-based neighborhood activists and organizations (Figure 5-5). However, as a state-labeled ‘experimental community,’ the Shiyang Community has also displayed many features that distinguish it from the Dejia Community. f

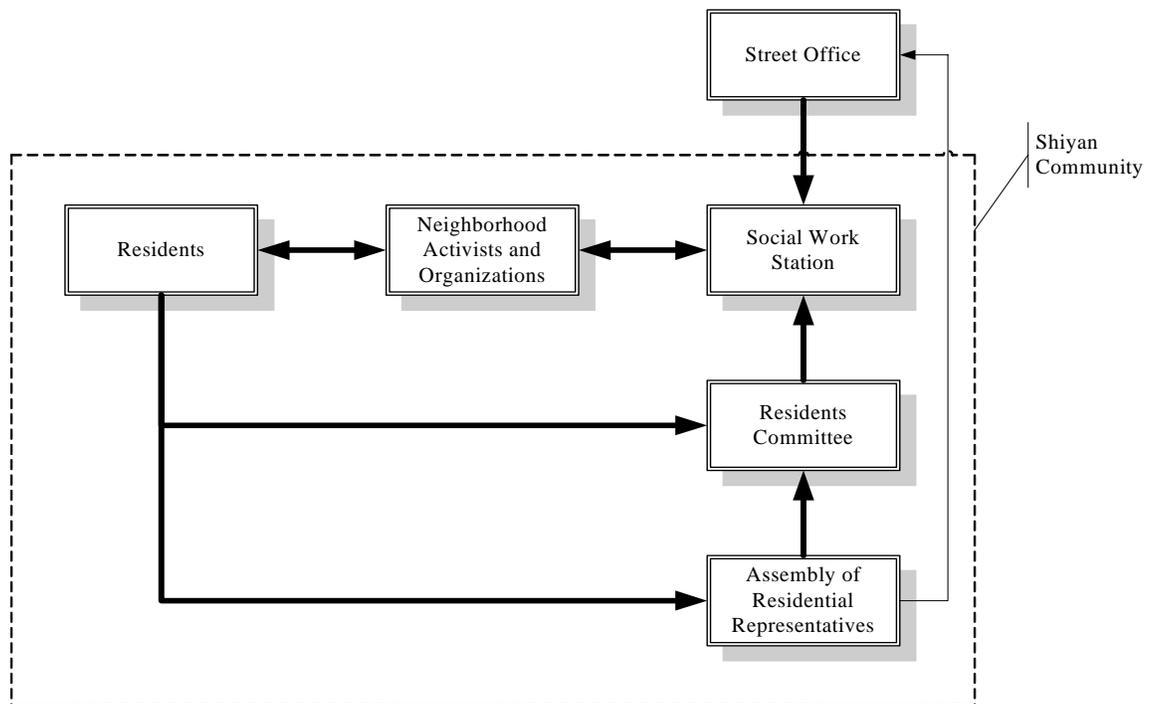


Figure 5-5: Structural Relations in the Shiyang Community

Again, let’s begin by discussing the new actor that has not been seen in any of the other communities—the Social Work Station (SWS). It was created after the direct election in June 2003. Of the six workers in the SWS, four are former members of the Shiyang Residents Committee and two were hired later. The SWS simultaneously serves two “superiors”: the newly-elected committee and the Pudong Street Office. The real

implications of the presence of the SWS can only be understood as they are connected to the 'experimental' changes that have comprehensively altered the way the committee functions in Shiyang.

Shiyang residents directly elected the committee in 2003. All its members are local residents and they work for the community on a voluntary basis without income. Unlike the other three committees, the Shiyang Residents Committee has no formal connection to the street office. The committee derives its legitimacy from Shiyang residents and does its best to function as though its interests overlap with those of its constituents. As a result, the committee maintains a high level of independence from the street office.

The committee's independence from the state and its identification with its constituents creates a basis for understanding its position within the community. Ordinary residents are able to influence the committee in two major ways: through direct election and the ARR. The former means is unique to the Shiyang Community. In addition, the Shiyang ARR is elected by its residents and its size has been reduced from seventy-nine to the current number of forty-two. This situation is obviously different from the situation detailed above about the Deji ARR. The fact that ARR members in the Shiyang Community are elected increases the size of the arena in which residents are able to be represented. Add to this the fact that a small ARR can be easily convened for any particularly important issue in the community, and it becomes clear that the dynamic of grassroots governance in the Shiyang Community (vis-à-vis the ARR and direct elections) is very different from the grassroots dynamics that have been discussed in the cases of the other committees.

The above two means go a long ways toward guaranteeing that the committee will act more in the interests of its constituents than most other Residents Committees. The new Shiyang committee is no longer just an “arm” of the state, as the Jingtai and Huashan Residents Committees arguably are. It also differs from the Deji Residents Committee in that it is much less beholden to the influence of the street office, and is instead accountable to the desires and preferences of ordinary residents. Understanding this context of accountability is a prerequisite for being able to in turn understand the SWS, since it is ultimately an outgrowth of the self-governing dynamic that is newly present in the Shiyang Community. This ‘self-governing dynamic’ has affected all spheres of interests and influence in the community including the committee itself, the ARR, neighborhood activists and organizations, and ordinary residents.

Examining the SWS closer reveals some interesting and very compelling things about the way that the street office and the committee interact in the Shiyang Community. The street office prepares a pool of candidates for SWS positions, and all applicants have to pass the street office’s examination in order to get their job candidacies. The committee then makes the final hiring decision from the pool. Additionally, in order to dismiss any SWS member, the street office and the committee have to reach a consensus.

This interesting dynamic of interaction and cooperation is also visible in other areas. The street office provides important financial resources to the SWS, such as its operating fund, but the committee decides how the operating fund will be used. The

committee also controls the daily operations of the SWS, although it must make sure that the SWS takes account the concerns of the street office as well.¹¹⁰

Such acts of cooperation and power-sharing benefit both the committee and the street office. First off, the committee needs the SWS because it does not have *the energy* to implement its decisions—all of the members of the committee are in their seventies. In addition, the committee cannot support the SWS financially. And as far as the street office is concerned, the SWS helps to clarify the division of labor between the street office and the committee, which reduces the functional burden that the street office has to be concerned with. The street office essentially has access to and jurisdiction over a professional organization that can and does implement its policies, and it is able to leave the remaining neighborhood affairs to the committee.¹¹¹ This division of labor eliminates the accusation that the street office intervenes in neighborhood affairs too much, and thus it also lines the dynamic of reform in Shiyuan up with the goals of those who are pursuing and studying existing and potential administrative reforms that can make for more accountable and efficient grassroots governance in China.

In fact, many issues handled by the SWS require close cooperation between the committee and the street office. For example, the committee must seek the administrative support of the street office in attempting to prosecute instances of illegal construction that take place inside the community. Also, the committee relies on the street office's support in holding its many activities, such as neighborhood sports events, etc. Reciprocally, the

¹¹⁰ This information comes from the SWS Management Code and the interviews.

¹¹¹ The street office can peel off some responsibilities, such as neighborhood security and environment cleaning.

street office heavily depends on the help of the committee as it attempts to implement and enforce state policies like the family planning policy. Therefore, the SWS is a true symbol of cooperation and reciprocity between the committee and the street office. While both are able to maintain their independence, they can also realize their goals through cooperation at the SWS.

Understanding the Functional Diversity from the Sandwich Structure

So far, the Residents Committee's structural relationships with both the street office and its residents have been discussed separately. It is time to discuss these upward and downward connections/relationships together in the interest of trying to understand the different functionalities that were observed to exist between the four communities in Chapter Four.

Jingtai – A Penetrative Residents Committee. The Jingtai Residents Committee, as stated before, falls into the penetrative model of grassroots governance, because its only real function involves political control. The committee's unique functionality derives from two facts about its context: on the one hand it is subject to the centralized-control auspices of the Weifang Street Office, and on the other it has essentially alienated itself from its community. The street office's strong influence forces the committee to take the state's will as its first priority, such as in matters of social control and administrative service provision. Most of these kinds of state-derived responsibilities (such as those that involve the implementation of population policy or the conducting of governmental surveys) require intensive involvement or cooperation with ordinary residents, and the committee's weak relationship with the community undermines its capacity to engage with its residents

effectively as such. The wealth of Jingtai residents allows them, however, to buy services from the market, rather rely upon the state or the committee to provide for them. The HPMC, a private business corporation, is hired to provide necessary services. This also contributes to the marginalization of the committee, and helps to explain why fraud occurs regularly in the carrying out of some governmental assignments. Finally, the workload involved with monitoring a few political suspects is light and does not require the committee to interact with large numbers of residents. Political control thus becomes the only viable function through which the committee can prove its usefulness to street office.

Huashan – A Corporatist Residents Committee. The Huashan Residents Committee is defined as a corporatist committee because of its collusion with the Meiyuan Street Office in the management of and involvement in neighborhood economy. The street office has great influence over the committee, as is seen in the fact that it was the street office that pushed the committee to develop neighborhood businesses in the first place. However, the street office does not fetter the committee. Instead, it significantly decentralizes economic power to the committee and—as is the case with many local governments in China—the street office plays its “developmental” role rather effectively. It leaves major decisions to the committee, it provides monetary and policy supports to the committee’s businesses, it secures sale channels, and it also honors a profit-sharing agreement with the committee. This decentralized economic structure provides both pressure and incentives to the committee to make more profit. In contrast, ordinary Huashan residents are stuck in something of a stress-position between powerful forces. The top-down connection that dominates affairs in the neighborhood excludes residents from

the benefits of the neighborhood economy, except insofar as they are consumers. The committee, backed by the street office, has established a monopoly over economic issues. Its close relationship with neighborhood activists has further consolidated its control over the neighborhood economy. Together, these factors explain why the committee was able to operate its businesses for such a long time, despite tremendous resentment from ordinary residents.

In addition, the street office's influence has also determined the fact that the committee has to carry out social control and other administrative services. In this regard, the Huashan case simply repeats the story of the Jingtai case. However, the Huashan Residents Committee is much more effective than the Jingtai one in matters of policy implementation, although the former faces an obviously tougher situation than the latter. The secret is the Huashan Residents Committee's close ties to neighborhood activists. These ties, which are primarily based upon the cronyism of cozy economic relations, helps to enable the committee to overcome the alienation and impotency observed in the Jingtai case.

Finally, the absence of any kind of self-governing mechanisms in either the Huashan or Jingtai Residents Committees also results from the way their structural relationships function. As far as the upward structural relationships of these two committees are concerned, the street offices have kept the two committees under tight control, which leaves neither the incentive nor the space for them to advocate the interests of ordinary residents. Regarding the downward structural relationships maintained by these two committees, the alienation and even antagonistic relationships that have developed

between them and their residents provides no historical basis that could allow the committees to identify themselves with their constituents or to become recognized as self-governing organizations.

Dejia – A Synergistic Residents Committee. The Dejia Residents Committee dynamically fits with the synergistic model of grassroots governance for two reasons: first, because of the comprehensive number of functions it has taken responsibility for and second because of its focus on building a “Service Committee.” Both of these reasons are deeply connected to the kind of relationship it maintains both with the Pudong Street Office and with its residents. On the one hand, the street office, though it is still very influential, has decentralized certain powers to the committee. On the other hand, neighborhood activists, independent neighborhood organizations, and an influential ARR together constitute a participative and dense network of interests that exist together within the community. This network counterbalances the committee’s hierarchical connection to the street office. As a result, the committee cannot simply serve the street office only and ignore its residents. Instead, it has to try to find a balance that is able to satisfy both the street office and its residents as often as it can.

The vertical connection it has to the street office prompts the committee to take on social control and administrative service issues, while the horizontal connection it has to the other above-mentioned interest-actors pushes the committee to address the interests of the community. The coexistence of these vertical and horizontal influences defines the comprehensive functionalities of the Dejia Residents Committee. The delicate balance between these interests further accounts for the peculiarity of each function the committee

has taken on. For example, the committee's connection to neighborhood activists greatly facilitates its capacity for handling social control issues. However, the same linkage has also allowed the committee to rethink its position on some less popular social control activities, such as monitoring *Falun Gong* practitioners.

Even though it has found new ways to carefully attend to the agenda of the state, the Deji Residents Committee has made some effort to extend and deepen mechanisms of neighborhood self-governance in the community, as is seen in what it's tried to do to establish financial transparency in its affairs. Its efforts as such are limited in scope, due to the intimate relationship it has with the street office. Ultimately, the committee is unwilling to take on touchy issues that involve the state. Even in the opening story in Chapter One, the committee did not challenge the powerful No. 1 Rest House of Tianjin City until angry residents threatened to protest in the street.

Certainly, the best example that can help to explain the nature of these upward- and downward-dynamics is the idea of a "Service Committee." It is clear that the presence of horizontal connections compels the committee to pay attention to its constituents. However, since its vertical connection to the street office ultimately presses down on it in a very influential way, the Deji Residents Committee does not advocate a "Self-governing Committee." Instead, it deliberately promotes those administrative services that are sponsored by the state but that tangibly benefit its residents as well; services such as social-welfare programs and the Starlight Senior Project. These services are such that both the state and ordinary residents are essentially benefited. The state gains legitimacy in the eyes of residents, and the residents obviously are able to receive certain social legs-up because

of the state. Therefore, the committee can satisfy both sides without putting itself into an either-or situation.

Shiyan – Another Synergistic Residents Committee. The Shiyan Residents Committee is consistent with the predictions of the synergistic model as well. Although both the Shiyan and Deji Residents Committees perform equally comprehensive functions, they also operate in substantively different ways in the field of nearly every function they have thus far taken on. And these differences, of course, can be attributed to the different structural relationships that have developed around the two committees.

The Shiyan Residents Committee enjoys the highest degree of decentralization from the street office of all four committees. Because of the direct election, the Pudong Street Office has lost many of its formal ties to the committee. Legitimacy is now conferred on the committee by its constituents, and not in the de facto agent-of-the-state type way that it once was by the street office.

The amount of autonomy that is thus allowed the Shiyan Residents Committee is directly tied to the way it interacts with its residents, and thus (as one would expect) the Shiyan Community is also witness to the most participative arrangements between committee and residents of any of the four communities that have been discussed. The committee's loose connection as such to the street office and its self-identification with residents enable it to avoid political responsibilities like monitoring *Falun Gong* practitioners; and for the same reasons, the committee is able to refuse some administrative services that benefit the community little. They also explain why the committee is even less enthusiastic than the Deji Residents Committee in undertaking even those

administrative services that might eventually benefit local residents. Its autonomy allows the committee and the community at large to think outside the box, so to speak.

The Deji Residents Committee functions as a compromiser between the street office and ordinary Deji residents. It faces a delicate situation where it has to satisfy both groups. In contrast, the Shiyang Residents Committee is more heavily influenced by ordinary residents than by the street office. Being an elected entity, the committee primarily needs to make its constituents happy. As a result, the committee devotes most of its energy to issues of community self-governance. It identifies and promotes those self-governing services that suit the idiosyncrasies of its community. It also takes concrete measures to encourage and institutionalize the process of neighborhood self-governance. In return, the progress toward self-governance reinforces the independence of the committee and insulates it from outside infringement.

However, the self-governing tendencies in the Shiyang Community *do not* imply that the committee will become a “challenger” to the political establishment. The power structure around the committee marks out a cooperative rather than confrontational relationship with the street office; this is exemplified by the way that the SWS is able to work with the street office, and not against it. The SWS is subject to the authority of both the committee and the street office. This dual leadership dynamic manifests itself in a very synergistic way. For example, the street office often needs to obtain the cooperation of the committee in order to effectively implement its policies, since the committee monitors the daily operations of the SWS. The committee is thus in a strong bargaining position, relatively speaking. Under these circumstances, it is usually willing to help the state in

exchange for its continued financial support of the SWS. This state of affairs is really very ideal in many ways. The committee does not push its envelope too far, and it probably does not desire to. Cooperation is in the interests of both players, except for a few issues where they are forced into confrontation, as was the case with the issue of commercial bungalows.

Structure and Functions in Summary

There is no doubt that the street offices still have enormous influence on the Residents Committees, which is attributable partially to the historical intimacy that has generally existed between them, but it must be acknowledged that the phrase ‘street office’ is not a generic term that merely refers to an organizational apparatus of the state. The phrase ‘street office’—wherever it is employed—carries with it a complex reality. Myriad variables in terms of the operational dynamics and the range of influence of street offices must be discussed in conjunction with any case study involving them. For the purposes of this project, one such variable that is keenly important is the measure to which a given street office wields its influence over the Residents Committees that are within its geographical jurisdiction. Indeed, the three street offices in this project impose distinctive impacts on their committees. The Weifang Street Office has the most centralized power structure. The Meiyuan Street Office has greatly decentralized its power in order to encourage the Huashan Residents Committee to run successful neighborhood businesses. However, it still strictly manages the committee in areas of non-economic concerns. Indeed, it does so in a way that is similar to the way the Weifang Street Office manages the Jingtai Residents Committee. In contrast, the Deji Residents Committee faces a more

relaxed regime of control with regard to the Pudong Street Office. On one hand, the Pudong Street Office is willing to share power with ordinary residents over the control of the committee. On the other hand, the street office attempts to leave more discretion in the hands of the committee so as to allow it to accommodate to the peculiar needs of their community. In the Shiyang case, the same street office has cut its ties with a Residents Committee even further.

Overall, what the committee's upward linkage with the street office looks like often plays a deterministic role as far as what choices the committee is *able* to make in terms of functionality. The establishing of a centralized and rigid control regime on the part of the street office confines the committee to being nothing more than an "arm" of the state, as in the Jingtai case. In contrast, a decentralized and flexible structure creates opportunities for diversity and innovation.

However, this is only one side of the story. To fully understand the functionality of the committee, one also needs to look at its downward linkage to ordinary residents, i.e., one needs to understand the structural relationships that exist *inside* its community. This is particularly important in examining the Huashan, Deji, and Shiyang Residents Committees, all of which are situated in the midst of decentralized control regimes. In a fragmentary community like the Huashan Community, ordinary residents are regularly subjected to the vertical control prerogatives of the committee. Committee-resident connections have thus become thin, fractured, strained, and even antagonistic. A vicious circle ostensibly develops in a scenario like this. The attendant consequence of this situation is that the committee has no desire to identify itself with its embittered constituents. And since

ordinary Huashan residents have not been able to exercise any significant influence over the committee, the neighborhood economy has evolved into a profit-making machine with little hindrance. This situation was essentially what the street office had originally intended to bring about, and it accordingly got to the point where the profit-making machine benefited only the committee and the street office. Admittedly, the committee had to deal with angry residents and other problems that derived from its own lack of legitimacy, but overall it was still able to enjoy significant benefits from the situation engineered by the Weifang Street Office.

In contrast, the Deji and Shiyuan Residents Committees face dense, multiple, and reciprocal networks of interests that exist inside their communities. These networks require their cooperation... they must work with neighborhood activists and organizations; they must in some sense comply with the accountability imperatives of the ARR, they are subject to the political winds generated by direct and indirect elections, and they need to be aware of and account for miscellaneous other self-governing channels that exist in various capacities for ordinary residents. These networks counter the vertical influence that originates from the street office and forces the committees to take local interests into consideration. In addition, the strength of these networks clarifies the extent to which the committees lean towards ordinary residents as opposed to the street office. For example, the Deji Residents Committee prioritizes administrative services, since it has stronger ties to the street office than it does to its residents. Meanwhile, the Shiyuan Residents Committee commits to neighborhood self-governance, because it is chosen by and is primarily responsible to its constituents, and not to the street office.

In conclusion, the Residents Committee's structural connections to both the street office and to its own community help to explain the functional diversity that exists between different committees. It is for the convenience of analysis that the covariation is comprehended essentially by analyzing the committee's separate linkages, downward and upward. In reality, the covariation occurs in a complicated setting. A committee is simultaneously subjected to the influence of both connections. More importantly, changes in one set of linkages often bring consequential changes in the other set. It is these dynamics of interactions between the street office and ordinary residents, channeled through the committee, that provide the context for interpreting the dynamics of the grassroots state-society relationship in urban China.

Residents Committee and State-Society Relations at the Urban Grassroots

A primary motivation of this project is to explore the changing state-society relationship in contemporary China, a nation which has witnessed spectacular economic growth under strict authoritarian political control. In confronting such a gigantic society undergoing profound transformation, this project can only realistically draw inferences from changes at the urban grassroots level, particularly as they are observed to take place inside the multi-tiered ‘sandwich structure’ relationship of the street office, the Residents Committee, and the residents. This ‘sandwich structure’ is a hotbox for intensive interactions between the state and ordinary residents, and as such it ostensibly is the ideal place for studying broad-based change as it takes place in China. The committee is an officially recognized neighborhood organization by the state, but the committee is neither a part of the state nor is it an element of civil society, at least according to the popular definition of that phrase. It happens to be an in-between organization that does not fit neatly into the traditional state-society dichotomy.

This chapter has delineated the connection between a committee’s function(s) and its structural relationship with the street office and ordinary residents. Now, it is time to reconceptualize the postulation stated in Table 2-2. The empirical analysis conducted thus far can now facilitate the theoretic remodeling of the committee’s functionalities in accordance with the dimensions of its structural relationships to the state and to ordinary residents (Table 5-2).

Table 5-2: Reconceptualization of the Analytical Framework

Street office	Centralized	Decentralized
Community		
Participating	Civil disobedience model	Synergistic model ¹¹² (Dejia; Shiyang)
Fragmented	Penetrative model (Jingtai; Huashan)	Corporatist model (Huashan ¹¹³)

The penetrative model describes a committee that is tightly controlled and that attempts to execute the will of the state amidst the confining limitations of a fragmented community. The civil disobedience model characterizes a committee with deep ties, where its constituents will fight against a regime of strict control engendered by a repressive state. Contrarily, a committee with some decision-making power on its hands might act against the interests of the community if it operates according to the dictates of the corporatist model, according to which a committee generally faces little resistance from ordinary residents. Finally, the synergistic model portrays a committee that works with both the state and ordinary residents in reciprocal ways.

This kind of analytical framework helps us to generalize theoretically about the four committees of this project, which can all be classified by three of the models. This framework has been well used in discussing and characterizing different kinds of state-society relationships that operate at the urban grassroots level. This section begins by summarizing the changes that have happened in both of the outer layers of the sandwich

¹¹² The synergistic model is similar to the social corporatist model in terms of the positive outcome from the structured interest expression. However, the later model primarily describes the cooperative structure in stable democratic countries. In those countries, the state functions like a moderator above competing social interests. In contrast, the synergistic model focuses on reciprocal connection in developing countries, including those non-democratic ones. The state there often fails to keep neutrality, but actively participates the process of social construction for certain directions it desires.

¹¹³ It refers to the economic function the Huashan Residents Committee takes.

structure. Then, the implications of these changes are explored in line with the four scenarios diagramed in Table 5-2. All of this eventually leads to some inferences about the broad state-society relationship in contemporary China.

Residents Committee and Urban Community

The Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees defines the Residents Committee as the only legitimate neighborhood self-governing organization, and so was essentially designed to serve and represent the interests of its residents. However, the committees have more often functioned as the state's instruments of social control than as entities of self-governance, especially during the pre-reform era when they were largely used as agents of social surveillance. As this project has pointed out, the committee has experienced dramatic changes since the reform. Nowadays, they are concerned in one way or another about all the residents in its community, and as we have seen in the case of several of the committees studied in this project, they often carry out a wide range of functions. And, regarding changes that have affected the committees, there are at least three things that need to be understood about the changes that have particularly affected the bottom layer of the state-Residents Committee-residents sandwich.

Neighborhood Participation. The idea of 'neighborhood participation' can refer to residents participating in activities put on by the committee, it can refer to residents sharing responsibilities in the community, or it can refer to them participating in elections. Neighborhood participation was rare in the old days, since most residents listened to their *Danwei*, and not to the Residents Committees. Only a few disaffected urbanites mobilized

around the committee so as to participate in state-sponsored events, like political studies. Since the reforms, the situation has changed completely.

Level of Neighborhood Participation. The Jingtai Community is an atomized neighborhood where there is scant neighborhood participation and where the committee is barely concerned about the interests of its residents. The participation level in the Huashan Community is also generally low, as most ‘participation’ occurs primarily between the Huashan Residents Committee and neighborhood activists. However, ordinary Huashan residents have participated in neighborhood politics in a few cases, even though their participation has been marked by contentiousness and confrontation. Examples of this kind of participation include everything from writing angry disclosure letters to physically attacking local officials. The Dejia and Shiyan Residents Communities have witnessed a higher level of neighborhood participation. Almost all neighborhood activists and ordinary residents in these committees participate in neighborhood affairs in one way or another. Both committees provide multiple opportunities for participation to all residents, such as by organizing elections for representatives for the People’s Congress at the local district level, or by organizing elections for residential representatives that gather in the periodic ARR meetings. Sometimes, outside people and organizations also participate in activities in these two communities, including students, private companies, and nearby officials from military posts.

Nature of Neighborhood Participation. The participation in the Jingtai Community is economic in nature. Ordinary residents purchase necessary services and the HPMC reaps profit by fulfilling these needs. This commercial exchange situation is in a sense non-

discriminatory, but it is based upon the ability to pay, which is totally different from the traditional type of top-down administrative services that are the norm in other communities across China. This situation is evidence of the fact that economic liberalization has infiltrated the grassroots level of urban areas.

The participation of neighborhood activists in the Huashan Community is economic in nature, too. They benefit from the neighborhood economy by exchanging their cooperation with the committee and the street office for profit and for some status. However, this type of corporatist exchange relies on dependency, not equality, and it provokes angry responses from ordinary Huashan residents. These responses, though they are often labeled ‘radical,’ can and should also be labeled as moments of political participation, where residents are aiming to voice their frustration and rage against the exclusivist neighborhood decision-making structure.

Political participation also occurs in the Deji and Shiyan Communities, but in very different ways. Both communities have established channels around the committees through which residents are able to voice their concerns and participate in decisions. Ordinary residents can take part in neighborhood politics through the ARR, elections, and various neighborhood meetings. These channels essentially rein in the power of the committee; meanwhile, they reduce the possibility of “radical” participation. Residents living in the two communities also enjoy engaging the community socially, which is very rare in the Jingtai and Huashan Communities.¹¹⁴ Social activities are particularly

¹¹⁴ The HPMC provides cultural entertainment activities to Jingtai residents. However, due to its business nature, those activities are very limited, such as the Mid-Autumn Festival Party once a year. Some of the cultural activities are for profit, such as community gym and catering.

important, since they are always related to the establishment of harmony, happiness, and the enjoyment of daily community life. The various diversionary clubs, neighborhood sports events, the community-citizenry school, and other voluntary activities greatly enrich community life and solidify informal and formal ties within communities. Finally, the two communities do not witness the level of economic participation on the part of residents that we see in the other two communities.

Neighborhood Institutionalization. Chinese urban communities in general are densely populated, which intensifies the urgency of tending to various social issues. Issues related to making a neighborhood safe, keeping a local environment clean, and simply attempting to establish a place of home where cultural and psychological satisfaction can be found in general... all of these things arguably become even larger challenges when tackled in the Chinese urban context. These communities are also units that are and have been subjected to a significant amount of social and political management, as is evidenced by the seemingly omnipresent facts of family planning and welfare programs in Chinese urban areas. In modern society, many of these issues are tackled by institutions, and as we have seen this is very much the case in China. The committee has perhaps a pivotal role in addressing the problems presented by the Chinese urban climate. It thus has a tough role to play, and in order to try, it ultimately has to rely on various neighborhood activists and organizations. The types of neighborhood organizations and the ways they are associated together are therefore important aspects of grassroots politics in China. Whereas Chinese communities were once marked by how atomized, divided, and *un*-institutional they were, neighborhood institutionalization has experienced significant changes in the reform era.

There are two types of independent organizations in the Jingtai Community, the Jingtai Residents Committee and the HPMC. The committee follows in line with the traditional method of effecting social control while the HPMC is really a completely new type of institution in urban China, and is in fact largely a product of the kind of commercialization Chinese urban areas have experienced in the post-reform era. They do not accommodate each other comfortably, because of their distinctive objectives and because they are almost completely disconnected from each other. To a large degree, the tension between them is a reflection of the broad paradox that would seem to be presented by the co-existence of authoritarian politics and a market economy. Economic liberalization continues to make the management of an increasingly open and diversified society a much more complex affair for the Chinese authoritarian state. The traditional means of strict control, it seems, have either had to evolve or have disintegrated entirely and have been replaced by institutions that are often separate from the state. In the Jingtai Community, both organizations play a zero-sum game where the HPMC gains almost always at the expense of whatever connectedness does exist between the committee and residents. The latter is marginalized since it does not (and really cannot) meet the needs or demands of Jingtai residents, and thus (as would be predicted by the proponents of free markets) other suppliers—in this case the HPMC—rise to meet the needs of residents. Ultimately, then, the Jingtai Community has essentially split, is very much tension-charged, and is witness to a very low level of institutionalization; and what institutionalization there is has been very much fragmented.

In the Huashan Community there is an interest symbiosis between its committee, private businesses, and neighborhood activists. They are closely tied together because of common economic interests. Neighborhood businesses need the committee's permission to operate in the community, and neighborhood activists benefit economically from cooperation with the committee and those businesses. The committee shares profits with the businesses and wins compliance from neighborhood activists for its other activities. The recent arrival of the dispatching security unit simply adds strength to the administrative capacity of the community. As a result, the community has a higher level of institutionalization than the Jingtai Community, since its major organizations are united and cooperate with each other. However, the interest symbiosis is quite an exclusive one and thus is not very much accessible by ordinary residents, which is different from the close connection that exists between the HPMC and Jingtai residents.

The institutionalization in the Dejia and Shiyang Communities is of a very different stripe. First, there is a very strong presence of neighborhood organizations in these two communities, such as the ARR, the senior association, the local YMCA, the SWS, various diversionary clubs, and even some other outside organizations that are active in the politics of the communities. These indigenous organizations each have their own unique ties to local residents, and these ties vary in terms of what motivates the organization to establish them, the size of the organization in question, and in terms of the history of each organization and how much potential there is that the local residents will continue to invest in their relationship to them. Together these ties and the relationships and capital that result from them establish the foundation of strong institutional networks. The Residents

Committees further strengthen this institutionalization by providing leadership, coordination, and support. And cooperation and leadership also go a long way towards building solid institutions in these communities.

Neighborhood Self-Governance. While it was originally enshrined in the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees (Article 1 and 2), the self-governing spirit that now is beginning to possess some committees has only recently become a phenomenon worth discussing. The four cases examined in this project show that there are encouraging signs that point towards the continued proliferation of a self-governing spirit. In the Jingtai Community, the HPMC has supplanted the committee in the management of most neighborhood issues. To a certain degree, this can be seen as an act of self-governance, since Jingtai residents have been able to freely choose the HPMC over the committee, essentially by a market means. Self-governance in the Huashan Community, unfortunately though, has taken on an ugly face. Unlike Jingtai residents, the residents of the Huashan Community cannot afford to purchase services, and this has basically meant that they have had to accept the scraps that fall from the table of the exclusivist interest symbiosis mentioned earlier that dominates Huashan politics. The accumulated resentment of such a disenfranchised citizenry not surprisingly led eventually to physical confrontation. Since the ‘interest symbiosis’ essentially maintained an exclusive monopoly over all the resources in the community, the people needed to find some way to make their voice heard. Fortunately, the “May 1” incident eventually broke up the interest symbiosis and has probably established a precedent for acts of self-determination. More in the way of self-governance and participation will likely follow.

In contradistinction to what the situation once was in the Huashan Community, self-governing practices have taken deep root in the Deji and Shiyan Communities. In these locales, ordinary residents have taken responsibility for a variety of neighborhood tasks and activities ranging from those involving daily security and environmental maintenance to those which require deep neighborly commitment and acts of mutual-assistance; and they have also taken the initiative in providing different outlets of cultural entertainment. They also participate in decision-making regarding issues of importance in their communities. In a few cases, they have even organized to defend their interests against various outside infringements. This high level of self-governance relies on active neighborhood participation and on well-established neighborhood institutions. The committees in these communities catalyze these self-governing practices as they coordinate the institutional “muscles” inside themselves. The Shiyan Residents Committee does the best job of all in this regard... indeed it has well-broadened and deepened a *series* of self-governing measures.

Residents Committee and the Street Office

While designating the Residents Committee as a self-governing organization, the Organic Law also requires it to assist the missions and ends of local governments, particularly those of the street office. The street office was not a significant player in urban management in the pre-reform era, since most urban residents were tightly controlled through the *Danwei* system, but the street office has moved from the periphery into the middle of matters of urban management; and it has done this (or has been forced to) when economic liberalization has gradually eroded the intimacy that once existed between the

state and its various working units. Can the street office effectively control these rapidly changing urban communities? This is a key question that needs to be answered if the state's governing capacity in cities is going to be understood. Since the street office is heavily relying upon the Residents Committee as it attempts to engage in grassroots management, then the committee becomes an important indicator for checking the pulse of the street office, the nerve end of the colossal Chinese state.

Effectiveness. There are at least three respects in which the committee assists the street office: political control, administrative control, and administrative service.

Political Control. It is in this arena where the history of the committee exhibits its greatest continuity, and yet it is no longer as important as it was three decades ago. All four committees in this study have devoted more energy to areas other than political control.¹¹⁵ It reflects a general tendency of de-politicization in an increasingly open society. Nevertheless, three street offices in this project are still capable of maintaining rather effective political control with the cooperation of the committees.¹¹⁶ In accordance with the request of the street office, the committees can arrange for tight measures of surveillance over political targets. These measures include such things as 24-hour monitoring, home visits, or peer surveillance. This micro security network has been interwoven into each urban community and helps the state to nip political troubles in the bud effectively.

¹¹⁵ Even the Jingtai Residents Committee spends more time on managing *Majiong* tables than political control.

¹¹⁶ The Shiyao Residents Committee has officially quit this function. However, it does not refuse to provide critical logistical support for the SWS (and the street office), such as the household registration system and the network of neighborhood comprehensive security team network.

Administrative Control. Most tasks of administrative control involve the general public rather than only a few political targets, which makes it a better touchstone for evaluating the social control capacity of a street office. The three street offices have performed in distinct ways in this area. For example, it is clear that the Weifang Street Office has basically failed to implement any administrative controls in the Jingtai Community, due to the impotent status of the Jingtai Residents Committee. The Huashan Community under the Meiyuan Street Office is deeply troubled by neighborhood crimes. In addition, it seems that neither the Meiyuan nor the Pudong Street Offices have come up with good solutions to the floating population problem. However, in general, the Meiyuan and the Pudong Street Offices are effective in implementing those policies that the state cares about the most, including the family planning policy, the household registration system, and neighborhood dispute mediation.

Administrative Service. This is the area where the street office has witnessed the most expansion since the 1980s. It includes miscellaneous tasks that are passed down from the district government, like those involving social welfare assistance, charity events, emergency event management, collecting fees, surveys, managing sewage and housing, developing local economy, etc. To a certain degree, the street offices have faithfully carried out these tasks. In terms of administrative service, the Meiyuan Street Office actively promotes the neighborhood economy in its communities, and the Pudong Street Office focuses more on non-economic administrative services. The latter has even set up a professional SWS in the Shiyan Community so as to assure the successful implementation of tasks involving administrative service provision. It is hard to say which committee is

most effective in this, as they engage in different activities. However, it shows that the street office at the very least has the capacity to effectively carry out its intended tasks with the cooperation of the committee.

Decentralization. The nature of the power balance between the street office and the committee varies between the four committees. The Meiyuan and Pudong Street Offices have delegated significant power to their committees. Relating to the broad social transformation that has been taking place in China, this decentralization would be better considered a permanent rather than a temporary trend for two reasons. First, the Chinese state has limited resources that it can deploy as it attempts to govern increasingly complex cities. The execution of many urban grassroots activities involves a bevy of trivial details. The street office simply lacks the ability to employ or gather this information without the help of the committee. Therefore, the street office is left in a position where in order to do its job it essentially needs to empower the committee. The Huashan, Deji, and Shiyan Residents Committees have proven the value of decentralization. The Jingtai Residents Committee shows how the exercise of strict measures of control by a street office can eventually stifle its practice of urban management.

In addition, the state is increasingly coming to understand the problems of over-centralization in social management. One of the key successes of the Chinese economic reforms is that they have decentralized economic power to non-state actors on a broad scale. This has enlightened and encouraged the state to pursue a decentralizing approach to social management. As the director of the Pudong Street Office, Ms. Wang Yun, stated “I feel that my street office is running behind the time. Even though my office has already

expanded by twenty times since the late 1970s, I still do not have enough people to handle the tasks we are responsible for now. The solution cannot simply be to hire more officers. Our government intervenes too much. There are many things that should be left to residents themselves, such as neighborhood security and environmental cleaning. My street office is trying to shrug off non-governmental jobs and give them back to local communities.” Although the street office is still in the preliminary stages of carving out a reasonable division of labor with its committees, the trend of decentralization that has marked the street office is worthy of note. It is very compelling to see how far the state has voluntarily allowed its presence in urban communities to diminish.

Responsiveness. In general, the street office responds to local residents infrequently. However, this project has been able to examine several very interesting cases in which residents have influenced local governments in one way or another. In the Huashan Community, ordinary residents used public confrontation as a way to make the district government aware of the mismanagement of their community, which in turn prompted the district office to reshuffle the affairs of the Meiyuan Street Office and the Huashan Residents Committee. And the Dejia and Shiyuan Residents Committees have also successfully defended community interests against local governments through non-violent means.

Aside from a few zero-sum cases, where local governments have responded in an all or nothing way to the aspirations of communities and committees, they have also responded to the committee for the sake of larger interests. For example, the Pudong Street Office has invited residential representatives to evaluate its performance. This illustrates

the fact that even local organs of the Chinese state are concerned with issues related to responsiveness. Leaders from the street office also attend the ARR regularly so as obtain feedback and suggestions from local residents. In both Deji and Shiyan Communities, I have witnessed cases where street officials voluntarily called ad hoc meetings with members of committees or groups of residents to discuss community affairs.

Rule of law. This penultimate and ever enigmatic component of governance has been designated as a priority in the new era of Chinese political reform. This project finds some evidence to support the existence of change related to the Rule of Law at the local government level. The clearest example of this kind of change involves the street office's efforts to standardize its connections to the committee according to the Organic Law. It was originally the idea of local governments, not ordinary residents, to promote self-governance in urban communities. The Pudong Street Office has made calls for the establishment of the ARR in all of its thirteen communities and has consistently encouraged the participation of local residents in matters of local governance. In addition, it insists that all of its committees must hold and be subjected to the results of "democratic" elections every three years, even though these elections are often conducted in perfunctory way.

The street office has also tried to clarify a division of labor with the Residents Committees, which has included gradually reducing the number of assignments it hands down to them. The establishment of the SWS in the Shiyan Community is also a breakthrough, since the Pudong Street Office has essentially relinquished direct control over the Shiyan Residents Committee. This means that the SWS—though it cooperates

extensively with the street office—is essentially a local and nominally independent entity. And finally, the street office has accepted the committee’s request to drop its political control duties, which is consistent with the “rule of law.”¹¹⁷ Even the Weifang and Meiyuan Street Offices have shown that they can make primitive but encouraging adjustments that aim at the same sorts of goals. For example, after the “May 1” conflict in the Huashan Community, the new Meiyuan Street Office ordered all of its seventeen committees to establish the ARR, hoping to induce residential participation and cooperation in those communities. In the Jingtai Community, the Weifang Street Office refrained from stopping the gatherings of the one-on-one marketing network, since no law forbids such gatherings.

The Grassroots State-Society Relationship and the Residents Committee

By any measure, tremendous changes have occurred, both in the way the Residents Committee functions and in the nature of the structural connections it maintains to the street office and ordinary residents. But because China’s urban society is so complex and is changing so dramatically, the evidence collected in this project is inadequate a foundation upon which broad generalizations about the nature of politics and social life in urban China can be based. This is simply a fact that any researcher who’s subject is the politics of contemporary China must learn to live with. But the vastness of the scale of the subject matter does not mean that the data collected here is unreadable because of its limitedness. Several inferences can be drawn and several readings can be made about the state-society relationship at the grassroots level based on the comparative data presented here. A

¹¹⁷ In China, only state agencies with legal authority can carry out political control activities, such as home visits. The Residents Committee is a non-governmental organization without such legal authority.

roadmap for doing analysis—which is comprised of the four analytical models—has been discussed in depth. The next challenge is to divine some possibilities that perhaps herald winds of change amidst the tangled jungle of grassroots state-society interactions.

A State Penetration Scenario. This scenario well describes China before the advent of the reform era which began in the late 1970s. In the pre-reform era, the state literally dominated every major aspect of society. Society existed largely as a conglomeration of scattered individuals, all of whom followed the baton of the state submissively. In cities, nearly all residents depended exclusively upon the state-run *Danwei* system for their physical needs as well as for the basis of their puny social lives. The Residents Committee supplemented the *Danwei* system with additional channels of control over social dissociates. Some scholars call this type of total domination by the state over society as totalitarianism (Tsou, 1986).

The profound economic reforms that have taken effect since then have persuaded most intellectual observers that totalitarianism is no longer the proper framework for characterizing the Chinese state-society relationship. And if the state really is receding (or retreating, depending on how one looks at it) then to what extent have its totalitarian roots been retained? More specifically, to what degree can the will of the current Chinese state penetrate the urban grassroots? What kind of a ‘totalitarian capacity’ does it still have for exercising the dictates of its will? The four cases, particularly the Jingtai case, provide helpful data that can be used to approach this question. This data as such will be returned to in a moment.

An attempt to answer the above questions must begin by discussing the impact that the economic reforms have had on urban neighborhoods. In the pre-reform era, urban neighborhoods were mostly divided into different working units. Each working unit provided public housing and other social services to its employees and their families. As a result, a neighborhood tended only to host residents from a same working unit. As long as the state owned the working units, it was easily able to control the employees. However, the reforms quickly dissolved the *Danwei* system, which—as already stated—was the backbone of the totalitarian control apparatus in Chinese cities. During the reform era the state-owned working units were dramatically reduced in size, and quickly became antiquated and usually much less efficient than their private-sector counterparts. This meant that more and more urban residents were no longer directly dependent upon the state for their livelihoods. In addition, housing and other social services were rapidly commercialized. As a result, the state lost its most powerful means of social control... the means to control an individual resident's economic status.

Another consequence of the reforms was the shocking stratification that developed inside a once highly homogeneous urban society. Some residents—like those living in the Jingtai community—became millionaires, while others fell into absolute poverty. This scenario was very common in the Huashan Community. In addition to dramatically affecting the economic status of individual residents, economic liberalization has also performed some seriously dazzling magic on many urban communities. A once promising community, like the Huashan Community, has degenerated into being a slum-like neighborhood in just ten years. Similarly, the once best living communities in the city, like

the Deji Community, were quickly surpassed by even more lavish neighborhoods, such as the Jingtai Community, in just five or six years.

The Jingtai Community has witnessed perhaps the most radical changes to the once totalitarian system as a result of commercialization. Its residents come from various backgrounds, which essentially means that social control effected by a unified working unit has become impossible. Heterogeneity as opposed to the old style homogeneity now marks the Jingtai community. In addition, the completely private ownership of housing property has sparked a consciousness of private interest and individuality into existence that is often not consonant with the state's will. A clear example of this can be seen in that most Jingtai residents even refuse to provide home telephone numbers to the Jingtai Residents Committee. This is a strong sign of privacy often seen in the Western societies. More importantly, Jingtai residents are wealthy enough to pursue rather independent lives. The prevalence of market mechanics allows them to purchase services and even different kinds of social security from private companies, like the HPMC... which again tends to marginalize the state.

Alongside the rise of private freedom in the Jingtai Community, the almost total disintegration of civic ties and reciprocity has taken place. This is one of the more unpleasant results of rapid commercialization. This is precisely what troubles Putman (2000) when he witnesses the thinning social capital in highly commercialized cultures like America. In the Jingtai Community as elsewhere, physical convenience and individual wealth tend to weaken one's psychological attachments to their neighbors. Many Jingtai residents do not even know who their next-door neighbors are. This kind of residential

apathy based upon economic independence makes it even more difficult for the committee to rely on the traditional means of urban control and mobilization that were the norm in the pre-reform era.

The embarrassing situation faced by the Jingtai Residents Committee—which has essentially become only a surrogate entity that is still attempting to maintain control through traditional means—is clearly the result of its inability to adapt to the challenges presented by commercialization. This project has laid out in detail the thin relationship that exists between the committee and ordinary residents, and the very limited functions the committee can take on as a result of this relationship. The committee is de facto paralyzed because of its alienation from the community, although it pretends to control the community. Except for the responsibility of political control, the committee has defaulted in almost all other administrative responsibilities of critical importance to the state. Because of this, it is fair to say that the state has lost effective control over the daily lives of most Jingtai residents.

Living in the Jingtai community, one feels little the ubiquitous shadow of the state that was so common in the pre-reform era. The proliferation of the market mechanism and the accumulation of wealth have opened a certain space in which Jingtai residents can act freely without the state's tutelage. The state is trying to substitute the Residents Committee for the old *Danwei* system. However, commercialization has profoundly undermined the state's capacity to maintain the type of control that characterized its totalitarian past. The erosion of the totalitarianism is also apparent in the other three communities. In the Huashan Community, the committee had been able to maintain some types of effective

control through a corporatist structure, but the accumulated tension eventually ignited furious confrontation between the street office and local residents. Even in the DeJia Community—where the most effective means of control are still maintained—its committee still needs to balance the desires of the state and its residents cautiously. As a result, it refers to itself as a “service committee,” which obviously has a neutral connotation. Finally, the Shiyang Residents Committee has simply abandoned its political control responsibilities.

In sum, the four committees have demonstrated different degrees of erosion of the state’s totalitarian control. While it is difficult to locate and precisely detail the remaining totalitarian elements of Chinese society, the broad trend is indisputable: as economic liberalization proceeds, the state is increasingly incapable of exercising domination over a stratified, dynamic, and somewhat self-sustained urban society. Thirty years ago, the state was the “society,” because the former had politicized and penetrated the latter almost completely. Today, the state is only one part of society. The question thus has now become this: what has filled in the new space created by the reforms and the rapid commercialization that followed? One possible candidate is “civil society,” which, as a term, often refers to the totality of civic and social organizations or institutions that form a basis of a functioning democracy in the West.

A Civil Disobedience Scenario. This scenario depicts a rising independent and spontaneous civil society that covertly and even overtly dissents from the state’s authority. This scenario is a strict interpretation of the liberal tradition that finds its origin with Locke and John Stuart Mill, since it emphasizes civic defiance and peaceful confrontation as the

best ways to counter the legitimacy of the abusive state. It is also informed by the experiences of those societies that were/are enduring democratic transition, societies like Spain, Mexico, and South Korea. A common characteristic of these societies is that in all of them the market economy is a key, if not an absolutely necessary, catalyst for the rise of civil society. The transitional theories have demonstrated that the market economy has tended to increase the size of middle class, which in turn creates heavy pressure for democratization at a certain transitional stage (Dahl, 1971; Lipset, 1981; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, 1992). While disagreements exist about the details of the mechanisms that are necessary for the transitional process, the mainstream of liberal thinkers believes that the market economy transforms state-society relations into a pattern of social realignment favorable for the rise of a civil society, the key function of which is to provide a counterbalance to the state and thus prevent its capacity for tyrannical abuse (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Held, 1996; Tocqueville, 1945). In line with this logic, the civil disobedience scenario advocates nonconformity, civil resistance, and peaceful revolt as the major forms of counterbalance in non-democratic systems. Although its focus on the disobedient side of civil society might seem to overlook or give short shrift to the possibility of cooperation between civil society and the repressive state, the spirit of the scenario is consistent with a classical understanding of civil society. Civil society has always been an independent arena of collective action that has been able to sustain itself without the tutelage of the state. The results of the above kinds of civil disobedience end up creating just such an independent arena.

In contemporary China, there is no doubt that the authoritarian state is a potential target for civil disobedience. The rapid commercialization of China has significantly expanded the amount of space available for social growth, which makes the civil disobedience scenario more alluring than the state penetration scenario for the development of any kind of contemporary or even future state-society relationship in China. How do the broad trends—the receding state and the expanding market economy—play out in terms of the civil disobedience scenario at the urban grassroots level? The three poignant disputes involving residents, grassroots organizations, and local governments discussed in this project can illustrate several things of importance.

The “May 1” event in the Huashan Community was a radical form of interest expression, in which angry residents spontaneously joined a public protest against both the abusive street office and the Residents Committee. In contrast, the case of the “No.1 Rest House of Tianjin City” in the Dejia Community is significant for two reasons. First, the target of struggle was a much more powerful state organization than a street office. Second, it was solved peacefully within the legal channel of the People's Congress of Tianjin City. The third case, the dispute over the commercial bungalows in the Shiyan Community, is equally meaningful, since the committee organized an assertive but non-confrontational act of disobedience against the street office.

In all three disputes, residents aimed to protect their private interests from governmental infringements. It reflects the fact that ordinary residents have acute interest conflicts in some areas with the state, and they are willing to take action to defend their interests. More importantly, these collective actions eventually won concessions from the

state, which of course has a strong tradition of discouraging and even opposing any kind of non-sanctioned concerted social action. To some degree, these three events point to the possibility of a grassroots socialization where society is self-organized and can be organized in such a way as to counterbalance the potential for abuse on the part of the state. This kind of a dynamic was completely foreign to the previous atomized society, where indeed all aspects of life were pervaded by the state.

The collective spirit of all these events can be easily connected to the prevailing discourse concerning Chinese state-society relations, that is, that the commercialization in China could initiate social and political changes that will undermine the institutional domination of the state and result in a more autonomous and self-interest conscious society (Baum, 1994; Gold, 1998; Calhoun, 1994; Harding, 1994; White, 1993a). Given the widely accepted covariate, if not causal, relationship between a market economy and civil society, it is not surprising to see that the rapid commercialization of China has prompted some analysts to look to civil society as *the* crucial concept related to the discussion of democratization in China. To a certain extent, the three events could be near-ideal endorsements for the liberal mantra. They illustrate the effectiveness of civil disobedience and how it can translate into a coagulation of interests that precedes the actual formation of organized elements of civil society. And the ultimate end of civil society is of course that it is to act as a collective counterweight to the state.

However, these events are really very ambiguous in nature and can be given rather divergent interpretations. A closer examination conducted in light of the larger context reveals some interesting facts that do not neatly fit into the liberal mantra. For example, the

“May 1” event in the Huashan Community could be viewed as more of an outburst of accumulated dissatisfaction by Huashan residents, undertaken in an irrational and wrathful way, rather than as an instance of constructive civil disobedience. According to this construction, the goal of the protest should not to be seen as a challenge to the political establishment, but rather as a message of alarm sent to the district government alerting it to the recklessness of the street office. Once the storm passed, the new Huashan Residents Committee and the Meiyuan Street Office re-established effective control quickly. The events that took place in the Dejia and Shiyan Communities are even more debatable. Both events were led by the Residents Committees, and they have always maintained a deep intimacy with entities of local government. The role of the committees in the two events can easily be described as dispute mediation between ordinary residents and the state rather than as public defiance against the state’s authority. In fact, these mediations benefit the rule of the state, since they help release the tensions that tend to accumulate in the rapidly changing urban grassroots arena. More importantly, these events are sporadic, and constitute only a tiny portion of the interactions that take place between the state and ordinary residents which are intermediated by the committees. In reality, it is not these few “flammable” events, but the interactions that take place on a daily basis that better define the nature of state-society relations in the urban grassroots arena.

This project does not attempt to deny the existence of classical dissent elements at the urban grassroots level, such as former student protesters, *Falun Gong* practitioners, and other socially discontented persons. These all clearly exist. The important fact to note, however, is that none of these groups can become organized in the eyes of the state as has

been observed in this project. And ironically enough, these groups are actually brought under control by the committee and by neighborhood organizations, which both have generally tended display rather supportive attitudes towards the state's control agendas involving these elements of dissent.

This project also argues that the liberal explanation of what constitutes civil society is even being overstretched when it includes neighborhood organizations that have little or no connection to the state such as the YMCA, neighborhood activists, various social groups of interest, and neighborhood senior associations. Compared to the Residents Committee, these organizations fit the category of civil society better, but even still none of them have chosen a position of non-conformity vis-à-vis the state. Rather, they are voluntarily involved to different degrees in the neighborhood network which centers around the committee. And it is clear that the underlying impetus of action does not center on defiance as far as these organizations are concerned, but on cooperation with the state.

Certainly one can argue that this kind of cooperation can be subjected to the liberal interpretation, and is consistent with some definitions of what constitutes civil society. Studies of the Eastern European communist countries have reported that there are some kinds of cooperation that exist between emerging civil society and the still overwhelming party-state, and as far as these observers are concerned this kind of cooperation is a strategic necessity for making sure that nascent civil society can survive and grow within those regimes temporarily (Weigle and Butterfield, 1992). In fact, state-civil society collaboration has even been observed to exist in developed countries in studies of public policy and economic/social development (Bradford, 2003; Mandell, et al, 1999). By

downplaying civil society as only being a counterweight to the state, however, those who so characterize it are interpreting and defining it in a weak and loose way.

Can the cooperation of the committee (and other neighborhood groups) with the state then be interpreted as a strategic compromise or as simply a new form of state-civil society collaboration? Again, this question has to be asked against the overall portrait of grassroots politics. While it is true that the committees have organized some collective counter-attacks against entities of local government, none of them has really adopted a position of civil disobedience. The common conception that commercialization gives rise to civil society fails to capture the reality about the mainstream character of state-society relations in the urban grassroots environment in China. The conventional ideas about civil society might lend themselves too quickly to predicting changes at the grassroots level in China as the result of rapid commercialization. They would be well-used, of course, if civil society eventually emerges, but China has experienced nearly three decades of profound economic reforms, yet only pockets of civil *elements*—rather than even a thin layer of what really constitutes civil society—currently exists at the urban grassroots level. Cooperative neighborhood networks, very sporadic elements of dissent, and an effective state together draw a very sober picture of grassroots organization which is very inconsistent with a sanguine and realistic liberal mantra. Contemporary Chinese society in general is ultimately unable and even unwilling to confront the authoritarian state. This raises a very interesting question: while rapid commercialization prompts many China observers to anxiously try to gauge when and how civil society can come to China, would it not also be helpful to step aside from the liberal mantra so as to examine the appropriateness of the

concept itself to China's reality? This type of thinking at least offers a new venue for explaining the absence of civil society in contemporary China. This idea is further explored in the next chapter.

In sum, both the penetrative and civil disobedience scenarios seem to point to some truths about how contemporary neighborhood politics work in China. For example, the totalitarian scenario reveals the continuity of the state's tough position on any political dissent. It also observes that a stiff political climate is creating new challenges for the authoritarian state, as is exemplified by the marginalization of the Jingtai Residents Committee. Similarly, events like "May 1" in the Huashan Community do contain elements of public defiance towards the authoritarian system, as the civil disobedience scenario projects; and it would be premature to declare that those civil elements will not gestate large-scale social protests or even the eventual establishment of civil society in China in the future. However, both scenarios, in keeping with the zero-sum logic of reductionism, oversimplify the prolific interactions that really take place within the political/social reality of the urban grassroots arena in China. This kind of penetration-defiance thinking only fuels the China Paradox, as the true state of neighborhood politics largely does not follow the tracks envisioned by the two scenarios. In this sense, and as far as studying China is concerned, reductionism is especially alluring and especially dangerous.

A State Corporatist Scenario. This scenario, which is derived from the Huashan case, could be accurately applied to China only if one jumps out of the dominant zero-sum thinking. On the one hand, the Huashan Residents Committee has exhibited no defiance of

the state, since it was monopolizing business activities with the blessing of the street office. Also, it is currently vulnerable to the state in the sense that the street office controls its personnel. On the other hand, the committee was not and has not been totally penetrated by the will of the state, although it has actively promoted the state's social and political agendas. In the economic arena, the committee is not a puppet, but is and has been an entity of its own interest. It has run its businesses independently, it has shared in a portion of the revenue generated by them, and has spent its accumulated revenue according to its own will. Thus neither penetration nor dissension, but interest collusion defines the connection between the street office and the Huashan Residents Committee. The 'interest symbiosis' that has been present in the community also includes neighborhood activists, whose cooperation is crucial for neighborhood management.

The corporatist structure in the Huashan Community is particularly interesting because it represents a transitional possibility between a purely state-controlled system and robust commercialization. A similar possibility for corporatism exists at the macro level since economic reform has weakened the totalitarian state and has increased economic and social freedom in China. To some extent, the Huashan case is like a miniature representation of what the broad transition has looked like in China. Like the rest of China, the Huashan Community has witnessed emerging business opportunities as a result of market expansion, such as convenient neighborhood services. These services were formerly provided rather inadequately to urban residents by way of the state's controlled channels of distribution. Since the economic reforms in China have been sponsored and planned by the state, it was not uncommon for those individuals and organizations tied to

the state to receive the lion's share of opportunities in the first years of reform.

Accordingly, the business opportunities in the Huashan Community were given to its Residents Committee. The committee maintained its daily operations so as to assure the profitability of its businesses. The Meiyuan Street Office was responsible for financial and logistical supports, as well as for guaranteeing the committee a monopolized status in neighborhood economy. Both then shared the profit from the businesses. This was a typical corporatist arrangement established on the basis of incomplete commercialization and the state's extraordinary influence in business. A similar arrangement can be easily identified in many areas in contemporary China, particularly in the economic arena. Many even believe that the corporatist bond is a key structural factor which is responsible for the thriving local economy in China (Gu, Shen, and Wong, 2001; Oi, 1995; Peng, 2001).

It is clear that the corporatist structure in the Huashan Community is different from the 'neo-corporatism,' which is a term used to refer to situations in open politics where policy makers are influenced or dominated by business enterprises, especially the military-industrial complex. Instead, the structure of Chinese corporatism bears some similarity to many of the social-corporatist economies of Europe, such as Austria, Ireland, and the Scandinavian states. The corporatist structures in these countries allow the state to effectively manage domestic interest cleavages, particularly those that exist between businesses and organized labor, so that the countries can adjust and perform well in the global marketplace (Katzenstein, 1984).

However, what serves for a better comparison to the Huashan case is the kind of corporatist structure that is found in developmental states, particularly the kind that exist in

East Asian states like Japan and South Korea. They have established dense ties to promising private businesses, they have provided them with monopoly status in their domestic markets, rendered them fiscal supports, and often times they even directly manage their production (Amsden, 1989; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990). Essentially, these kinds of corporatist structures have greenhoused their domestic business interests, effectively protecting them from foreign competition while they nurture them into strong global competitors. These states have also effectively lowered labor prices and have silenced labor discontent in a way that unabashedly exemplifies the fact that economic development is a singly important priority for these governments. The corporatist structure in the Huashan case, although it is much more coarse and negligible in scale, displays many similarities to the structures of these developmental states. Like these developmental states, the Huashan corporatist structure has been rather effective in promoting business growth. It also demonstrates how the interest symbiosis that develops in concert with businesses and free markets is more effective in terms of social control than would be a purely top-down penetration structure, as is evidenced by the Jingtai case. This effective type of control can be used for understanding the national politics of social control. Kang (2000) attributes the political stability at the macro level after 1989 to the solidarity had by elites in a corporatist context. He argues that the pre-democracy movements in the late 1980s taught the political elite lessons about forming interest coalitions with officially sanctioned economic and intellectual elites in order to expand the ruling basis and in order to contain unstable trends.

However, the developmental states discussed above only represent one kind of possibility for corporatist arrangement. The exclusive corporatist ties that exist between the state and businesses, even if they are not perfect, are justifiable when society can eventually benefit from developmental outcomes. Another possibility, which is vicious but is even more common in the developing world, is 'Latinization.' Latinization represents a situation in which a market economy, a divided society, and corrupt politics coexist and resultingly create periods of prolonged repression, stagnation, and injustice. The marketization that happens under conditions of political monopoly reinforces economic privileges for a few and wealth disparity, which in turn precipitates the formation of elite coalitions and their repression of the interests of the general public (Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, 1979). The state corporatist structure thus becomes a preemptive arrangement to prevent dissent interests from being mobilized into organized social and political opposition.

This is the scenario that captures the essence of the corporatist structure presented by the Huashan case. The nature of the Huashan case rests upon the symbiosis of partial commercialization and power monopoly. While the corporatist structure in the Huashan case might have begun similarly to a developmental state, it had become increasingly Latinized as it shifted attention from serving residents to hoarding profit. The same force, economic liberalization, gave rise to the symbiosis but also eventually led to its demise. At the beginning of the reform era, the street office and its close affiliates successfully used their monopoly to exploit the commercial opportunities present in the communities for their own interests. This created a rather effective and stable symbiosis, in which various

kinds of corruptions, such as nepotism and secret spending, prevailed. Ordinary Huashan residents were excluded from the process, and many even suffered because of the business operations. However, the continuing economic reforms gradually undermined the interest monopoly and made it increasingly unsustainable. The accumulated antimony finally led to a violent public protest, which broke up the corrupt corporatist structure.

The vicious cycle displayed by the Huashan case reveals a possibility for transition, which has important implications for China's broad social and economic arrangements. The various levels of government in China have been credited for rapid economic growth because of their active involvement. In other words it has been credited for doing something similar to what a developmental state does. However, there are increasingly outcries against the corruption and distortion that seem to come along with things that the government is heavily involved in. As marketization deepens, the legitimacy of the state's domination over the economy—particularly regarding the type of corporatist structures already discussed, of which the Huashan case provides an example—has been gradually undermined. Certainly, it is irresponsible to assert that what happened to the Huashan Community will be eventually replicated at the national level. Any such happening would involve a much more complicated logic of development than that which has been used to describe the Huashan situation. In addition, there is not even a consensus about the appropriateness of applying the term 'corporatism' to the Chinese pattern of growth, although some observers strongly insist on doing so. However, the Huashan case at least reveals some inherited structural tension that resulted from a low-level state corporatist arrangement, and in particular it reveals what such fallout looks like when the context in

question involves corporatism that exists between entities related to the market economy on the one side and an authoritarian state on the other. These kinds of situations need to make it on to the radar screens of those who study Chinese politics. Although a case like the Huashan case finds its origin in a very low profile neighborhood, the type of interaction it bespeaks between the movers and shakers of the local scene needs to be explored. For while China's economic miracle has impressed most observers, any kind of state corporatism, if it has contributed to the miracle, may eventually lead to a kind of Latinization. This is a disastrous possibility that China must cautiously guard against, and that those who study China must be on the lookout for. And they must look for it in all areas... not just the high-profile ones.

This point leads this discussion on to the next series that must be answered. First, to what extent is the corporatist scenario applicable to the rest of urban neighborhoods in China? Or, in terms of what has been studied by this project, what can we infer from the Huashan case about the state-society relationship at the urban grassroots environment in general? A close examination of the facts about the Huashan case suggests that there is little universal about it. A monopolistic status, similar to that which the Huashan Residents Committee enjoyed at one point, is a precondition for the existence of a corporatist structure in a community. The other three committees studied all face different situations. In the Jingtai Community, the HPMC actually marginalizes the Jingtai Residents Committee. The Deji and Shiyan Residents Committees also lack a monopolistic status in their communities. They have to listen to and share power with other neighborhood organizations, such as the ARR, YMCA, and other neighborhood groups. The power

structure in these other environments does not allow them to exclusively collude with the street office while ignoring or even harming their constituents. And so—as far as the data collected by this project is concerned—there is no more reason to assume that the Huashan situation is any more common to the Chinese urban grassroots environment than any of the other types of scenarios that play themselves out in the other three communities.

In addition, a corporatist structure is expensive to maintain. The collusion in the Huashan Community was possible not because members of the committee received stipends from the state with which they could facilitate a corporatist style dynamic. The stipends they received were lower even than the minimum wage level in Tianjin City. Indeed, the issue of cost and the committee is a broad one. First, the cost of unifying neighborhood activists was beyond the committee's normal operational budget. Rather, it was the lucrative neighborhood businesses that sustained the interest symbiosis. Additionally, the Huashan Community is located at outskirts of the city, so it faced nearly no competition when it started providing its convenient services. Its success story cannot be easily copied by most inner city communities, where the competition for convenient neighborhood services has already been met on a wide variety of fronts all around those communities. It is hard to believe that the committees there can be more economically successful than those of private businesses. Without stable revenue, the interest collusion could never have been extensive, strong, and persistent.

Finally, even if the initial conditions are met for establishing a corporatist-type arrangement, the sustainability of corporatism still remains a generally questionable matter. The nature of state corporatism is an exclusive process of profit sharing among elites,

which inevitably creates a haven for corruption. The resultant discontent from the public that inevitably arises often forces the elite to further solidify its coalition rather than giving concessions to the public. Thus, this kind of inherent structural tension finds no outlet until it blows up the whole system, as has been often seen in some Latin American countries. And of course this was precisely the outcome in the Huashan case. The committee was rather successful in operating businesses and fulfilling the state's social control missions for more than fifteen years. But the accumulated tension eventually broke up the corporatist structure, and it did so in an unfortunate way.

In sum, the corporatist scenario might be popular in the economic arena, but most urban communities do not possess favorable conditions that would allow for its sustenance or extension. Nevertheless, the scenario is enlightening, since it indicates a possibility for the transition of urban neighborhoods as well as for the nation as a whole. Rather than considering the Residents Committee to be either a puppet or an enemy of the state, the Huashan scenario signifies the potential for its cooperation or, more accurately, for its *collusion* with the street office. In looking closely at the Dejia and Shiyan cases, cooperation between the street office and the two committees looks quite different.

A Scenario of State-Society Synergy. This synergistic scenario is illustrated by the Dejia and Shiyan cases. It reveals another possibility for a broad-based change in the nature of urban state-society interactions; one in which street office-committee cooperation crosses the public-private division and produces positive outcomes for both the state and for local communities. This sort of cooperation would really work in a very circular way. The mutual enhancement as a result of the synergy leads to more autonomy for the local

committee, and also to better local service provision. A better service provision then leads to an increase of intimacy and trust between the committee and its residents, which in turn enhances the legitimacy of the committee and thus makes governance easier, whether the governing initiatives are originated locally or down from the state.

The synergy is tangible in that the Deji and Shiyang Residents Committees are susceptible to the winds of influence that come from both the street office and their constituents. The fact of the combination of both the decentralized structure of the Pudong Street Office and vibrant neighborhood participation in the Deji and Shiyang Communities has enabled both the respective committees to traverse the state-resident boundary that seems to be so strong in the other two communities. For the street office, the task of neighborhood management, which involves such things as social control and administrative services, is tedious and nearly impossible to handle without help from its fourteen committees. The size of the street office has swelled quite a bit since the 1980s; yet it still cannot keep pace with the rising challenges of urban management. Therefore, it has to rely upon the committees for help. Meanwhile, the committees have established an intimate relationship with the street office and are still heavily dependent upon the street office for things such as fiscal resources, policy execution assistance, and for help with coordination in general. This kind of interdependence forms their basis for cooperation and co-production. In practice, the street office and the two committees have maintained a relatively clear division of labor, which has roughly corresponded to their abilities and operational foci. The street office is able to provide those supports that most efficiently complement the inputs that are delivered to the community by the two committees. Adding

the two kinds of inputs together results in greater output than either side could deliver on its own.

However, decentralization on the part of the state only creates the potential for synergy. It does not and cannot create the organizational vessel or network that by necessity must be the other side of the coin. A participative community that contains dense neighborhood networks of association is crucial for effecting of the committee's most important functions. Mobilized activists, neighborhood organizations, and ordinary residents are imperative for complementing the committee's organizational skill, energy, and familiarity with the locality. More importantly, active inputs and direct involvement from the community help to prevent the street office-committee connection from deteriorating into cozy collusion. The Huashan case shows how the presence of interwoven ties between the committee and the street office in a fragmentary community can precipitate the creation of a corrupt interest symbiosis which operates at the cost of the public. In contrast, neighborhood participation, which is based on voluntarism and cooperation, can bend the committees toward the interests of ordinary residents.

The synergy it has been able to establish with local communities has yielded multiple benefits to the Pudong Street Office. The most obvious benefit it has received involves the effectiveness with which it is able to implement its policies in its neighborhoods. It has outperformed the Weifang and Meiyuan Street Offices in nearly all policy areas, which can be seen in the fact that the Pudong Street Office is able to depend on its committees to carry out a myriad number of functions. The Weifang and Meiyuan Street Offices can depend on their committees for little. In the social control area, the

Pudong Street Office can rely upon comprehensive neighborhood security networks that are indigenous to their neighborhoods for successfully attending to a series of state agendas that originate from the street office. These agendas include everything from monitoring released convicts to imposing population policy control standards on the populace to maintaining neighborhood security. This synergy as such also allows the Pudong Street Office to adequately address a wide range of administrative issues, such as welfare and unemployment relief, charity events, and cleanup campaigns. In contrast, the other two street offices are stretched thin even in their social control tasks because of the flimsiness of their committees.

This committee-street office synergy has also increased the Pudong Street Office's legitimacy among ordinary residents, largely because the Deji and Shiyuan Residents Committees have performed rather well in serving their residents. Although tension with ordinary residents has arisen occasionally, the street office in general faces neither apathy nor resentment of the kind seen in the Jingtai and Huashan Communities. In addition, since the street office has decentralized power to the committees and has encouraged neighborhood self-governance, it has also consequently established a cushion between itself and ordinary residents. The committees, since they are accepted as representatives of the communities, can serve as mediators between the street office and residents when disputes arise. In addition, the expansion of mechanisms of grassroots self-governance and even neighborhood democracy in local communities also extends the amount of accountability that the Pudong Street Office has to ordinary residents. And of course, the committees gain significant autonomy in this scenario and are treated more like partners

than subordinates. These two facts have gone a long way toward heading off the development of the kinds of incidents and conditions that have marked the life of the Jingtai and Huashan Communities.

Meanwhile, a synergistic relationship also creates obvious benefits for local communities, which has been detailed elsewhere. For example, the Dejia and Shiyan Communities have much higher levels of participation than the other two communities. Residents take part in neighborhood affairs through multiple means like neighborhood meetings, volunteer activities, community entertainment events, and even through participation in elections. Perhaps the most fundamental change in these two situations has been the reorientation of the committees from being one-time instruments of the state to being self-governing organizations. This has catalyzed neighborhood institutionalization and has turned what were once loosely associated living compounds into lively, dense, and reciprocal communities. Dejia and Shiyan residents participate in neighborhood decision-making processes, receive better services from both the street office and the committees, and have begun to hold and be responsible for a variety of cultural, educational, and entertaining activities, all thanks to what has happened in terms of neighborhood institutionalization. This point is of particular importance to Chinese society as a whole, since the entire urban grassroots arena has long been in a state of disunity and disarray that essentially was the result of decades' worth of state penetration and domination. While the top-down authority dynamic that wrought so much damage on urban grassroots communities still persists today, the Dejia and Shiyan Communities have been increasingly institutionalized in various ways, and have moved all the more towards being marked by

representation and self-governance instead of collapse, disunity, and sociological atomization.

The win-win situation that exists between the street office and urban neighborhoods in the Dejia and Shiyang Communities would seem to represent quite a different dynamic from the pattern of social development that characterized the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. The expansion of grassroots self-governance in those countries was widely portrayed as resulting from the erosion of the communist rule. But although the civil organizations that were associated with that period might temporarily have had to sleep with the “devil” due to a severe power imbalance that favored the communists, the social institutionalization woven around them nevertheless undermined the legitimacy of the state. The situation in the Dejia and Shiyang cases displays a rather different pattern: as grassroots self-governance expanded, the ruling capacity and the legitimacy of the state were strengthened rather than undermined.

The Pudong Street Office significantly empowered its committees through a dramatic decentralization of power to them. Meanwhile, it has also been a key advocator for neighborhood self-governance. In order to make the committees accountable to residents, the street office has even introduced democratic mechanisms into its neighborhoods, such as direct and indirect elections, and the ARR. While self-governance and neighborhood democracy are still processes that are in their infancy, it is an indisputable fact that the committees have become significantly accountable to local residents, particularly the Shiyang Residents Committee. This committee has arrived at a point where it should be classified as a very independent and self-governing grassroots

organization. However, these empowered committees do not ignore the street office's agendas and disregard its instructions. The street office-committee relationship has simply become more dynamic and productive. For the state, none of its essential and sometimes unpopular policies, such as those involving birth control and monitoring released convicts, have been compromised because of the growing independence of the committees. Instead, these state policies have been carried out more effectively since the committees have been tied more closely to their residents. In some areas, the committees have even voluntarily sponsored activities that benefit the rule of the state, such as classes in patriotic education and legal lectures. More importantly, the empowered committees are able to better serve those indigenous demands that are often beyond the state's capacity. It not only saves money for the state, but also helps create neighborhood harmony and order, which ultimately enhances the state's legitimacy.

Apparently the Deji and Shiyang cases demonstrate a new possibility for transition in urban China to a new state of affairs. This new possibility only loosely resembles the trajectories of transition that have taken place in corporatist Latin American countries, and barely resembles at all the ebbs and flows of the political movements in the former communist countries of Eastern Europe.

Synergy in neighborhood affairs—when it is achieved—sets cooperation rather than opposition or collusion as the tone of neighborhood politics. The state still maintains an asymmetric amount of power, which enables it to fulfill its missions in grassroots management, but it is an adaptive entity and has shown itself willing to share power with localities in order to cope with new situations. It has even begun to seriously endorse

neighborhood self-governance as a priority.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, in this project we have seen that ever-expanding participation from ordinary residents has become increasingly common in the affairs of some neighborhoods in China. However, we also see that this does not undermine the state's legitimacy or prevent the possibility of close cooperation with the state at the urban grassroots level. Power decentralization on the part of the state and active neighborhood participation have led to the mutual empowerment of the state and of local communities... a synergistic result which is very distinct from either the civil disobedience scenario or the state-corporatist scenario.

While it is not the goal of this project to tell how widely the synergistic scenario can be applied in urban China, there are at least three points that allow for cautious optimism about its potential expansion. The first point involves the effectiveness and sustainability of the synergistic scenario—at least as far as the Shiyan and Deji cases are concerned. The economic reforms have profoundly changed the governing structures of Chinese cities. The traditional type of urban management practiced in China (which has been based upon direct control as seen in the Jingtai and Huashan cases) has proven to be very problematic. The opposite of this kind of situation, though, would require an autonomous, self-generating, and self-supporting civil society to be a substitute for the state. The unfeasibility and perhaps inappropriateness of this scenario for China was discussed earlier. This kind of development was shown to be only wishful thinking, given the state of current social and political conditions in the urban grassroots arena. The

¹¹⁸ The Pudong Street Office will introduce direct election to all of its other committees in 2006. Overall, direct election is still at experimental stage. However, there are evidences to suggest the possibility that the Chinese government would expand the experiment to more regions in the near future. For example, the Tianjin Municipality has decided to have at least half of its committees generated through direct election in 2009.

Residents Committee will remain the leading organization of neighborhood governance for the foreseeable future. Given this, and given the current linkage point occupied by the committee in the Chinese grassroots political apparatus, a synergistic scenario is perhaps the only viable situation where both the state and ordinary residents can be satisfied.

In addition, the Chinese government has already promoted the development of just such a synergistic arrangement in rural villages. Wang (2003) finds that grassroots self-governance organized around the Villagers Committee in rural China has empowered not only peasants, but has also helped the state to regain the legitimacy and governability it lost during early years of the economic reforms. Like rural villages, urban communities are also facing severe governing challenges, since both are being subjected to the same ever more intense and deep waves of economic liberalization. If synergy works in rural villages, why should not the state at least make an effort to gauge the appropriateness of it for urban communities?

It is partially because of the success in rural villages that the central government has been prompted to endorse synergy as the future direction of urban community reform. On November 19, 2000, the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council jointly issued a nationwide notice, calling for enhanced cooperation between local governments and neighborhood organizations and expanding neighborhood democracy and self-governance.¹¹⁹ In China, any “Notice” issued by the above two organizations together signifies nothing but the official position of the state and the policies it intends to adopt and eventually implement.

¹¹⁹ “A Notice about Forwarding [A Suggestion of the Ministry of Civil Affairs to Promote Nationwide Urban Community Development] by the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council,” [2000] no. 23.

Here the experimental nature of the Shiyang Residents Committee must be given special attention. In China, most reform agendas are first tested in pilot experiments before final policies are popularized nationwide. Therefore, the experiments conducted in these pilot cases have strong implications for the future direction of reforms, depending on their relative success or failure. The Shiyang Residents Committee is one of two cases where direct election was piloted in Tianjin City. Thus by virtue of its pilot status, the Shiyang Committee-Pudong Street Office situation is more likely to be the model for future reform than the situations of the other three committees. The synergy thus observed as having been successfully established in the Shiyang Community could conceivably contribute to the data that helps to organize the next round of national reforms. However, the pilot status of the Shiyang Residents Committee also makes it a special case that perhaps should set it apart from other normal Residents Committees one would expect to find elsewhere in China. While the Shiyang case has been very successful, one central thing is causing local officials to debate whether the Shiyang Model could be extended easily to other communities: all current members of the Shiyang Residents Committee are seniors who work voluntarily. Are there enough senior volunteers in other neighborhoods that could perform equally as well? Have they acquired enough skills to handle neighborhood affairs, in the same way that Shiyang members are able to? Will their health conditions allow them to work full time, or to handle the sometimes stress intensive job? These are legitimate concerns that should raise questions about the applicability of the Shiyang case to other communities. Therefore, the Shiyang Residents Committee as a pilot case presents perhaps an ambiguous case for grassroots synergy. The fact that it does have some different

features from normal Residents Committees cannot be ignored, but it still has some predictive value for future possibilities for reform. After all that has been said here, this cannot be discounted.

In sum, compared with the other three scenarios, the synergistic scenario represents the most latent possibility of transition for current grassroots state-society relations in China. However, this optimistic scenario, precisely because it is attractive, must be approached cautiously. Assuming cooperation between the state and local interests is possible when contextual factors exist that are incongruent with the necessary prerequisites for implementing the Dejia or Shiyuan scenario... this kind of assuming will only eventually embitter those engineers who hope to improve urban communities at the grassroots level in China. Nevertheless, since the Dejia and Shiyuan cases have proved the viability of the scenario, it should be further explored in greater depth.

Conclusion

China's economic miracle has been baffling critics for nearly three decades. The obvious "out of beat" situation that exists between economic liberalization and strict political control is what creates the China Paradox. China represents a distinctive pattern of development that does not easily fit into prevailing analytical frameworks. This project has attempted to examine one aspect of the paradox, that being the grassroots state-society relationship in urban China. The grassroots situation as examined by this project can be characterized neither by using civil society to once again aggrandize the paradigm of "society" domination (Migdal, 1988), nor by singing the praises of the state in a way that reinforces the desires of those who wish to "bring the state back in" (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985). Rather, this project begins and ends with the enigmatic Residents Committee. It is contended here that in order to properly understand grassroots politics in China, this organization must be further investigated.

Any judgment about the dynamics of the grassroots state-society relationship involves first an acknowledgement of the fact that it is a relationship that is in transition and that it is not straightforward. It has multiple facets and seems to be in a constant state of flux. In general, transition often implies inconclusiveness, as China is painfully finding out as she experiments in order to find a stable state-society equilibrium that she can apply to her rapidly changing urban environment. The grassroots situation is further complicated because of its diversity. This project has identified three types of scenarios that can be applied only with regard to the Residents Committee, but there is no single vision that explains all. Indeed, the transformation of such a gigantic society can easily come with any

of numerous “anomalies” that will certainly frustrate any “grand theorization.” In order to get at this spirit of the transformation, it seems like it would be more prudent to applying inductive reasoning shot through and inhered with prolific evidence. This kind of an approach is wholly more appropriate than engaging in deduction that is dogmatically guided by prevailing propositions which may be inappropriate to the context. The inferences made by this project are limited because of the small number of cases studied. Still, a detailed comparative analysis of such a key grassroots organization should be recognized as an imperative starting place for investigating the true nature of the state-society relationship in contemporary China. Common themes emerging from this project have been subjected to further examination by looking at other segments of state-society interactions. Starting from there, some major inferences are made by this project.

First of all, the Chinese state still retains an asymmetric amount of coercive power over society at the urban grassroots level, despite the fact that its society has undergone an ever-increasing social and economic diversification in the past three decades. No grassroots force can challenge the authority of the state, at least not in foreseeable future. Meanwhile, it is clear that China is moving away from its totalitarian past, and the process is irreversible. The *Danwei* system has been largely dissolved and those totalitarian elements that remain as residue constitute only a tiny portion of the state’s rich interactions with ordinary residents. The state has neither the capacity nor the willingness to re-achieve total domination over society. Indeed, local governments have had to continually adjust themselves according to the changing urban environment. In urban communities, absolute control has been gradually replaced with decentralized management and services.

Chinese urban society has never been as diversified and vigorous as it is today, thanks to economic liberalization. Residents enjoy lots of freedom in economic and social arenas. Even the political arena has begun to assimilate to gradual but concrete waves of reform that aim to empower local residents. Urban communities increasingly have been confronted with active residents, energized volunteers, and independent neighborhood organizations, all of which help to carve out space for grassroots self-governance. However, these encouraging signs do not substantially point to the advent of a bottom-up democratization, since the urban grassroots has generally been unwilling to confront the state. The liberal mantra misses the point in this because it fatally underestimates the state's capacity for social control. But more importantly, it fails to recognize the simple fact that regular Chinese residents often treat the state as a plus rather than as a threat. In the eyes of general urban residents, the current government has acted more or less positively and benevolently. Despite the conflicts of interest that they have with it from time to time, ordinary residents and the state often find more ground for cooperation than confrontation.

However, the grassroots state-society dynamic is far from trouble-free. Local governments in general are still lumpy and intervene too much. This in addition to the fact that urban grassroots communities are often fragmentary and incapable of self-governance points to the fact that there are other issues that will affect China's long term prospects for political evolution besides political will. This imbalance between over-reaching local governments and passive communities has created many polemic disputes, some of which

are actually very contentious. As reform movements deepen, structural tensions that exist now might well be intensified, if they are not attended to and given the proper adjustments.

Such adjustments become promising only if both sides engage with each other cooperatively at the grassroots level. Synergy based upon decentralized state power and residential participation has proven to be an effective mechanism for traversing the public-private cleavage. As this project points out, there is evidence that mutual benefit can indeed derive from such efforts. Indeed, the synergy observed in this project is not an unheard of phenomenon, as it is found in some other developing countries, such as Brazil (Ostrom, 1996; Tendler, 1997), Mexico (Fox, 1992), and India (Heller, 1995). As Evans (1996, p. 1130) argues, synergy is more than an outcome of endowment, and “there is every reason to believe that synergy is constructable. ...Even in class-divided societies suffering under disorganized, authoritarian governance, innovative institutional tactics can foster synergy on a limited scale.” This project has identified some encouraging changes that have taken place both in local governments and in urban communities, which—at the very least—supports the potential value of a further examination of synergy at the urban grassroots.

Finally, acknowledging that the evidence that has been gathered from the grassroots level in this project has limited generalizability, the evidence from this project can be summarized as follows. Economic liberalization has dissolved the traditional overlap of state and society in China, which creates possibilities for several trajectories that transition could follow in China. In the midst of an overall process that can be characterized by a shrinking state and expanding society, China is still witness to a

situation of a strong state and a weak society. And since it is absorbed by formidable challenges and uncertainties, it is unlikely for China to either fall back on totalitarianism or to leap forward to political democratization in the near future. Rather, there emerges the possibility for very promising state-society cooperation at the urban grassroots level. And it seems that this kind of cooperation will involve a realigning and accommodating of political authoritarianism and economic openness into a sustainable pattern of development.

Conclusion

The Residents Committee, It Challenges, and the Liberal Mantra

Chapter Six

Prologue

Every Friday afternoon, all members of the Shiyan Residents Committee, the SWS, and some residential representatives held a meeting to summarize the activities of the past week, plan the coming week, and discuss issues of importance. These meetings usually lasted about an hour. However, the meeting on June 25, 2004 went unusually long because a very contentious issue was brought to the table. Like many lower-to middle-income communities, the Shiyan Community has mixed property ownership; there are few privately owned apartments, however, with the rest being either completely or partially owned by local governments or companies. The housing bureau in the Pudong Street Office leased out eight Shiyan apartments for commercial usage, which contributed at least 50,000 *yuan* of net income to the street office.¹²⁰ This was a very contentious issue that the committee to tackle at its weekly meeting.

Those present at the meeting offered essentially three opinions. The first of these opinions, advocated vehemently by Grandpa Liu Yunhan, was for the community to share—if not totally take control of—the leasing revenue. He justified his argument by citing Articles 4 and 17 of the Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees, which guarantees the committee's sovereignty in terms of property rights and requests that local

¹²⁰ Grandpa Zhao Fu suggested that this estimated number might well below the real figure, although he did not know the exact profit from those apartments.

governments provide for the committee's operating budget. While acknowledging the fact of the committee's budget difficulties, Grandma Liu Baolan read the law very differently. Her interpretation was that the street office owned the property and therefore it was in fact legally entitled to the leasing revenue. Whether or not the committee's budget derived from revenue related to its eight apartments or not was ultimately up to the street office, not the committee, as far as she was concerned. Grandpa Zhao Fu and Liu Jingyu agreed with Grandpa Liu Yunhan in principle that the committee should share at least in a portion of the revenue, but they strongly opposed discussing the issue with the street office now. They apparently sympathized with Grandma Liu Baolan's position, and thought that the street office was all around in a better position to press for its rights than the committee was. They also believed, however, that if any discussion were to be had with the street office about revenue sharing that it would have to be done at just the right time. "It is a bad time, since the (street) office has also gotten into financial trouble. The dispute (over the two commercial bungalows) has already irritated the office. We should not trouble them further at this time. Our committee is only one year old and we still need continued support from the office. We can discuss our financial trouble with them and see if they can help us. But we definitely want to avoid the perception that we are cutting into their territory. We must maintain our good relationship (with the office). At this time, I think we should focus on our internal affairs and postpone the issue until later," said Liu Jingyu.

After tense debate, the committee decided by a majority vote not to raise the issue. A potential storm was temporarily quelled. However, this event allows for some interesting speculation about the future prospects of the committee. This conflict begs the question of

whether the committee's self-governing nature might threaten the current synergy with the street office that made success possible to begin with. To conclude discussion about the committee and the grassroots state-society relationship, I will firstly focus on some of the challenges facing the four committees.

Challenges Facing the Residents Committee

The interviews I conducted with committee members help to generate a comprehensive picture about the challenges facing the four committees (Table 6-1).

Table 6-1: The Top Three Challenges Facing the Residents Committees (%)¹²¹

Residents Committee					
Challenges	Jingtai	Huashan	Dejia	Shiyan	Average
Administrative assignments and interventions from the street office	34	38	7	21	29
Committee's limited financial resource	0	20	38	50	23
Committee's limited jurisdiction	0	9	12	0	7
Deficiency in the committee's managing structure	17	0	0	17	5
Low income working for the committee	27	14	0	0	9
Rapid increase of demands from residents	0	5	5	0	4
Low participation from residents	22	14	38	4	21
Low capacity of self-governance from residents	0	0	0	8	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

For the Shiyan Residents Committee, financial problems are the most troublesome issue. This perhaps explains why the committee was so sensitive to the issues that came up in the meeting discussed above. The committee also worries about the number of interventions that they have to or will have to deal with from the street office, despite their current enjoyment of a high level of independence. Finally, this is the only committee that questions the readiness of its constituents for self-governance. This is a problem that has not yet been confronted by other committees.

¹²¹ The questions were prepared before the field research, and remained the same throughout the interviews. All members of the four committees were asked to choose the top three challenges facing their committees. The table is weighted according to the ranking of their choices. For example, the first choice is weighted three times more than the third choice, and the second choice is two times more than the third one.

The issue of financial problems also ranks highest for the Dejia Residents Committee, which is understandable given the large number of diverse activities it sponsors. However, it is interesting that the committee complains of low residential participation. After all, Dejia residents participate much more than Jingtai or Huashan residents. The problem arises, as far as the committee is concerned, in the fact that it has been finding it difficult to push the degree of participation higher and/or deeper in the community. And in order for all of its ambitions to bear fruit, even more participation than they can already count on (which again by relative standards is quite a lot) is going to be necessary.

The new Huashan Residents' Committee, led by Mr. Cao Hui, clearly attributes its troubles to the street office. The committee continues to be tied up by a huge number of many governmental assignments. And, as is the case with the Dejia and Shiyan Residents Committees, the Huashan Residents Committee is also troubled by its enduring financial restraints.

Interestingly enough, the Jingtai Residents Committee protests more than the other committees against the street office's assignments and interventions. In addition, the Jingtai Residents Committee complains of low compensation and the general apathy of Jingtai residents.

At first glance, the four committees seem to be dealing with rather distinct challenges. However, an integrated analysis of all committee members interviewed reveals some interesting things. Governmental assignments and intervention (twenty-nine percent) rank as the greatest challenge across the four committees. The second greatest challenge,

budget shortage (twenty-three, is also related to the street office, as it is the greatest source of income for the committee. If we add the low compensation issue into the equation, nearly sixty percent of challenges identified originate from the street office. This evidence supports the argument that the top-down influence coming from the street office is comparatively stronger than the bottom-up influence of the residents. It also reflects the latent presence of what may become an across-the-board appeal to the street office for further decentralization and clarification of labor division. The third challenge is low participation from residents (twenty-one percent). Engaging ordinary residents has become an increasingly crucial factor that constrains the committee's performance, regardless of its specific functional agenda.

It is fair to say that the specific challenges facing the committees reflect their equally distinctive functionalities. But all of their challenges originate in the same two places: in their structural connections with both their residents and the state. These connections, which shape the committee's function(s), also indicate from where (or which of these directions) future challenges for the committee might likely come from.

Liberal Mantra and Chinese State-Society Studies

Up to this point, the project has been devoted to the purpose of analyzing state-society relations as intermediated through the Residents Committee. The findings in this project convey the mixed possibilities of grassroots state-society transformations in urban China. On one hand, the Chinese state is still effective at containing any concerted pressure from below, although its ultimate capacity to do so has been weakened by the economic reform. More interestingly, in the face of a rapidly changing urban society, local governments have demonstrated flexibility, adaptability, and developmental intention. Paradoxically, there is an emerging trend at the urban grassroots level in which the effectiveness and legitimacy of the state are actually improved after it loosens its control by decentralizing power to local communities, actively promoting neighborhood self-governance, and even experimenting with grassroots democracy.

On the other hand, urban communities have become increasingly participatory, institutionalized, and independent from the state. In this process, civic organizations play a secondary role, since they generally have neither the will nor the capacity to challenge the state. Although disengagements, non-conformities, and even confrontations occur here and there, cooperation with the state emerges as a promising trend in urban governance. Ordinary residents and the state are able to find more common ground than differences. Neighborhood affairs are not organized around these civic organizations, but the Residents Committee, which maintains close relations with both the state and residents.

The nature of the neighborhood politics unveiled in this project provides little ammunition to the traditional interpretation of the committee as merely an instrument of

state penetration. This should not surprise us, as fewer and fewer China observers still portray totalitarianism as the defining characteristic of contemporary Chinese politics. What makes this project interesting is the rather distinctive formats of state-society interaction very different from what the liberal mantra envisions.

While the evidence allows no easy generalization of this profoundly social transformation, a consistent pattern in urban neighborhoods is the absence of a so-called “parliament of the streets” or “parallel polis” as seen in some former communist countries such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary. The phenomenon of a network of autonomous civil organizations as an alternative to a central and repressive state is not present China, despite her functioning market economy and ever-enlarging social complexity. Among all the explanations given in this project for neighborhood politics, the civil disobedience model proves to be the least relevant. Expectations of even a nascent civil society at the urban grassroots level are premature if not misleading at this time. Such a judgment reflects reality on the ground as well as the country’s prolonged authoritarian history, including the thorough domination of the party-state in the new Republic.

The findings of this project have been examined in light of the popularity of the civil society concept gained particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European communist states. Democratization in those countries has partially been attributed to a rising civil society that carved out critical public space for bottom-up opposition (Rau, 1991; Tismaneanu, 1990). Proponents of civil society argue that the concept has universal applicability to the rest of the communist countries (Miller, 1992)

and other developing countries (Cammack, Pool, and Tordoff, 1988; Migdal, 1988), despite the different cultures and traditions in individual countries.

Seizing upon the concept of civil society, Western scholars have quickly expressed enthusiasm in exploring the possibilities of civil society in the Chinese context. Some focus on the gap between Chinese reality and the ideal type of civil society, and starting from there, offer their moral criticism of the political establishment in China (Chamberlain, 1993; Madsen, 1993, 1998; McCormick, 1991). Others attempt to discover civil society in contemporary China (Chan and Nesbitt-Larking, 1995; Chen, 2002; Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1992; He, 1997; Howell, 1998; Gold, 1990; White, Howell, and Shang, 1996; Kelly and He, 1992; Kluver, Randy and Powers, 1999; Ostergaard, 1989; Perry, 1989; Pye, 1991; Solinger 1993; Strand, 1990; White, 1993b; Yang, 1989; Yang, 2003) or trace its existence in Chinese history (Bergère, 1997; Kwan, 2001; Rankin, 1986; Rowe, 1984a). While admitting its inadequacies to various degrees, they generally tend to agree that the civil society concept is a very useful theoretical tool to understand the increasingly vibrant Chinese society in the reform era.

Echoing this international attention, scholars trained in China have also engaged in heated discussion on civil society and the political development of China. Ma (1994, p. 192) examined this domestic trend into two groups. The first group, domestic Chinese theorists, contemplates “the making of a modern citizenry, consisting of law-abiding and civil members of society.” The second group, exiled Chinese intellectuals, focuses more on the creation of a private realm that is independent of and contentious with the state. While the first group initiated the Chinese discourse on civil society by advocating a soft

interpretation on state-civil society relations, something of a less hostile and more harmonious interpretation, it has gradually lost its control over the discourse to the second group (Ma, 1994). The second group's view is essentially similar to the civil disobedience model developed from the transitions of communist states in Eastern Europe. "In terms of social structure, ideology, economic system, public psychology, and in particular the model of development of civil society, China has more similarities with East European countries than with East Asian ones" (Su, 1991, p. 35). Liu (1991, p. 8) praises East European intellectuals for daring "to confront the state and party while maintaining remarkable self-restraint in the course of their long struggle. They worked hard to develop a civil society." Their successful stories should inform their Chinese counterparts that "China needs a flowering of all kinds of independent organizations, especially free trade unions, and a strengthening of civil society," according to Liu (1991, p. 9).

While some scholars have expressed reservations about its applicability in China (Dean, 1997; Huang, 1993; Moore, 2001; Wakeman, 1993), the civil society concept has gained paradigmatic status in the Chinese state-society discourse. Interestingly, despite the Residents Committee's quietly powerful roles in today's urban neighborhoods, it has been largely neglected in this sweeping mantra. However, we can still project the "would-be" liberal interpretation by looking at how its twin organization, the Villagers Committee, is understood.

The literature in general has expressed cautious optimism about the transformational role of the Villagers Committee toward a more open political environment in rural China (Bai, 1997; Carter Center Delegation Report, 1997, 1998;

Epstein, 1997; International Republican Institute, 1994, 1997; Oi and Rozelle, 2000; Pastor and Tan, 2000; Shi, 1999; Wang, 2001; Wang, 1997). It is portrayed as a key organization channeling groundbreaking democratic practices in rural China, a flawed but nonetheless genuine democratic element. Within this huge literature, the direct election in the Villagers Committee has gained particular attention.

The elections have hatched a new elite with firm roots in local society, which may be able to play an active role in the democratization of Chinese society. The system of democratic self-government is being established in the rural areas of China (Wang, pp. 247-252).

While facing criticisms pointing to the authenticity in rural elections, Pastor and Tan (2000) defend their political significance in a long-term process of democratization.

One should not conclude that they [rural elections] are unfree, unfair, and meaningless. ... It is a process of incremental improvement, and if an election helps a country move forward on a more civil, democratic path, then it is a satisfactory election. Within the context of 5,000 years of Chinese authoritarianism, there is no disputing that village elections represent a significant step toward a freer system, and many villages have seen improvement with each round of elections (Pastor and Tan, 2000, p. 506).

They further claim that China is right to start democracy in the rural villages, and free and competitive elections are the most effective instruments to assure citizen demands in economic uprisings and downturns (Pastor and Tan, 2000, p. 508, 512).

This liberal scenario is further reinforced with positive evidence as a result of democratic elections. Oi and Rozelle (2000) discovered that the Villagers Committees after open elections pursue more open accounting of village spending, and are more accountable to peasants. O'Brien (2001) finds that free elected committees serve as important sources of entitlement and inclusion for the bottom-up growing citizenship of peasants. Diamond and Myers (2000) even believe that village elections have naturally led to experiments at

the township level with direct election, a mid-term democratization, in which “The slippage in control, part purposeful and part unexpected for the local authorities, brings these elections a step closer to a **normative vision** of electoral representation familiar in liberal democracies” (Manion, 2000, p. 782; emphasis added).

Although the literature on the Villagers Committee rarely attempts to appeal to the civil society concept, it treats the committee and rural elections as something near to an incipient democracy. This passion shares the same root with the paradigmatic status of civil society in Chinese state-society studies, that is, the liberal mantra to understand the profound social and political development in China.

While there are a myriad of definitions, those who follow the liberal mantra usually accept that civil society is, at minimum, an arena of uncoerced associations without the tutelage of state power. The distinction between civil society and the state constitutes the key precondition for the role of civil society in modern history. The populance of civil society has historical roots as a key dogma in the liberal mantra,. A significant reason is the increase of statist appeals from the late 19th century up to the mid-20th century. This enthusiasm spurred the state to various forms of erosion, intrusion, and even abolition of civil society by the state. As a response to the rampant expansion of statism, people naturally started appealing to the ideal of civil society to analyze and criticize the great tension between state and society (Keane, 1988). Thus, civil society acquired not only social and historical urgency, but also reclaimed moral and political attraction.

However, a more significant cause of its prevalence is the dizzying political transitions in many left-wing and right-wing repressive states in the second half of the 20th

century, particularly the successful democratization of Eastern European countries and the former Soviet Union. Rupnik (1979) once called the political development in Poland between 1968 and 1978 “the end of revisionism and the rebirth of civil society,” i.e., the result of the bottom-up effort spawned by the idea of civil society.

Opposition in today’s Poland has come to mean independent social activity which virtually ignores official institutions ... For this reason by opposition we understand articulate expression of disagreement with official policies by an organised body whether permanent or not, whether legal or not. By dissent we understand spontaneous, sporadic or continuous manifestations of dissatisfaction or disagreement with official policies in all spheres of social life. Expressions of non-conformity or resistance can often spill over into dissent (Rupnik, 1979, p. 61).

Shils (1991) also attributes the Eastern European transition as being the outcome of the emergence of civil society ideas. Although the communist states were relatively successful in dissolving civil societies, they were powerless to erase their ideologies.

Taylor (1990) clearly defines the normative function of civil society in non-democratic societies.

In societies suffering under Leninist tyranny, it articulated the hopes of those fighting to open spaces of freedom. Originally, when the chances of doing away with these power structures altogether seemed remote, the notion “civil society” expressed a programme of building independent forms of social life from below, free from state tutelage (Taylor, 1990, p. 95).

Here it is worthy to mention that the majority of Western schools interpret the social transformation in these communist countries as the triumph of Western values, ideals, and institutions. A critical assumption of this judgment, in terms of civil society, is the universal validity of the structural framework, the state-civil society model based upon the liberal notions, which can cut across spatial, cultural, and historical dimensions. Civil society should be treated not only as a necessary instrument to resist and/or confront

absolute power, but also as a prescriptive goal for its own sake (Ash, 1989, p. 246). The underlying moral imperative is to spread and perpetuate the liberal zeal to both non-democratic and genuinely free societies across the world.

However, while the liberal mantra is sweeping across the world, it faces an interesting challenge from the developmental path of China, the one I call the “China Paradox.” China outperforms many developing countries in terms of her commitment to the market economy; yet she maintains the strongest political authoritarianism among all major industrializing countries. This unique concurrence upsets the liberal mantra that tends to purport the tandem of a free economy and open politics, although the soft-liners are also willing to consider short-term dynamics besides simple economic determinism (Przeworski, 1986).

For the liberal mantra, the China Paradox cannot be simply dubbed as an anomaly resulting from her sheer size and extraordinary progress over the past three decades. To call it a temporary issue in a long-term transition is equally debatable. If the liberal mantra could not envision what has happened in China, where is its basis to predict the future, let alone that three decades are not easily called temporal? If only eighteen percent of Chinese urban residents thought the communist one-party system should be changed, another six percent wanted only minor changes, but thirty-one percent did not care as long as life was improving, and forty-four percent did not want any change at all (Tang, 2001), we have to ask a question: “What has gone right politically during the economic liberalization in China for the past three decades?”

It is fair to say that the liberal mantra faces difficulty in explaining the manner and velocity through which China has been undergoing change since the late 1970s. The point here is not to communicate the argument that it fails to account for the Chinese developmental path. That requires much more intellectual endeavor beyond the scope of this project. Rather, this investigation strives to tentatively explore the applicability of the liberal paradigm in light of a particular segment of the China Paradox, grassroots state-society interactions where politics are absolutely alive and inspiring. Using Khun's term (1962), a dominant paradigm is the established "truth" that has won the confidence of the scientific community. It is then applied to tell what is "scientific" and what is not, as well as to guide the conduct of research and the appropriate standards for the verification and evaluation of the findings. This project attempts to explore to what extent civil society, a key concept in the liberal paradigm, is applicable to the urban grassroots level of China. Although neighborhood politics is only a drop in the bucket of the gigantic Chinese society, it refracts important knowledge about the profound transformation that China is experiencing.

Based on the findings of this project, three tentative lines of argument can be drawn insofar as grassroots state-society relations and the civil society concept are concerned. The initial line stems from the nature of the Residents Committee.

Residents Committee, Amphibian Organizations, and State-Society Dichotomy

Given what has been discussed here, it can clearly be seen that the current functioning and dynamic of the Residents Committee differ from what was envisioned and intended by the original legal definition as it was found in the previously mentioned

Organic Law of Urban Residents Committees. It is a grassroots self-governing organization which represents the interests of its residents, but it also needs to facilitate the state's governing initiatives. These two competing purposes undoubtedly have given rise to a far larger diversity of function vis-à-vis the other Residents Committees in urban China than has been found even in the four committees studied by this project. Indeed, the four committees discussed here display such distinct functions and structures that I have had to use at least three different analytical models in order to discuss them and to place their dynamics of operation into the larger discourse. The amount of diversity in general (again in terms of functionality) that has been found prevents a succinct definition of its nature. This project advocates a descriptive connotation over the nature of the committee.

First, the committee is an intermediary between the state and local residents and is subject to the simultaneous influence of both. Although the influence from both sides varies by time and place, the committee is not completely subsumed into either side. It might lean towards one side or another, yet it acquires a unique existence as an interlocutor; it is neither a purely state apparatus nor is it a completely independent grassroots entity. The committee compensates for the state's inability to micro-manage at the urban grassroots. Meanwhile, it also offers a viable forum wherein residents can handle either a large or small number of neighborhood affairs. Recognizing this intermediary status allows us to discuss the impact that the state and local residents have on the committee while it also allows us to maintain the integrity of the committee without reducing it to a simple element of either side.

Second, as an intermediary, the committee receives recognition from both the state and local residents, i.e., dual legitimacy. In one way, the state passes laws to legalize the committee's status, and provides it with necessary logistical support. In the other way, ordinary residents generally accept the committee as an integral and leading neighborhood organization in community affairs.

However, this dual legitimacy does not imply that the committee is equally loyal to both the state and ordinary residents. Indeed, the general focus of the residents' committees in China has been markedly different depending both on the context they are embedded in and depending on the social and political circumstances confronting them. This fact prompts discussion about the third feature of the committee. The boundary between the committee and its upper linkage to the state or between its downward linkage to residents is neither a clear-cut nor a differentiating one. Indeed, the boundary line is often blurry, fluid, and dynamic in accordance with each committee's specific social and political context. To varying degrees, the state and local residents can penetrate the committee, construct its boundaries, and shape its structure and function(s). In this sense, the committee is not a static organization but rather is a malleable and transforming one, one whose definition and operational focus varies according to its particular historical and social context. For example, the committee was largely understood as being nothing more than a social control instrument in the pre-reform totalitarian era. However, such a conception no longer characterizes the committee appropriately given the current Chinese context of social expansion, and given the new kind of political authoritarianism that is found in the country today.

Finally, the committee is a public-oriented organization. For the state, the committee is a partner that can help it to implement its national policies and to solve local problems; for residents, it is a place where they expect to and often can address localized public concerns. Its public nature—which ultimately derives from its in-between status—distinguishes the committee from primarily private-oriented institutions, such as the family, individual businesses, or independent single-focus organizations, all of which do not have nearly the same kind of in-between status that the committee has.

The above four characteristics together define a unique type of social organization, one which I will refer to as an “amphibian” organization. The word ‘amphibian’ is normally used to refer to animals that have an aquatic larval stage and a terrestrial adult stage. I use this word in order to attempt to capture the transformation that the Residents Committee has undergone. It was once essentially an instrument of social control and now it has largely become a quasi-balanced ‘intermediate’ organization. An ‘amphibian’ organization such as the committee cannot appropriately be characterized as an element of civil society, but neither can it be accurately characterized as an arm of the state. Instead, it bridges the chasm between state and society, yet is also able to maintain its own distinct features, its own logic, and its own unique sphere of influence.

The fact of the amphibian nature of the Residents Committee highlights the inadequacy of the binary thinking that usually dominates discussions of Chinese state-society studies. But of course, this is not the first time that the failings of binary thinking have been highlighted. Binary logic is often criticized for its reductive tendencies... for its intention to draw sharp, straight lines over complicated and rugged social phenomena. For

example, Montesquieu (2001) dissolved the sharp contrast between state and society by arguing that the “corps intermédiaire” are “amphibian” bodies that exist both within and outside of established political structures, and thus function so as to link state and society. Schumpeter (1968) highlighted the amphibious relationship that exists between institutions in the process of capitalist “creative destruction.” Habermas (1989) also noted the existence of a “tension-charged field between the state and society” in his discussion of the concept of a “bourgeois public sphere.” He described this ‘field’ as a similar concept to civil society, and as a clear antithesis to state power.

Between the two [state and society] and out of the two, as it were, a repoliticized social sphere emerged to which the distinction between “public” and “private” could not be usefully applied (Habermas, 1989, p. 142).

Landing on the ground of Chinese politics, Huang articulates the concept of “the third realm” to label “the space intermediate between the state and society in which both participate” (Huang, 1993, p. 224). In contrast to the rigid state-society dichotomy—

The concept of a third realm enables us to talk about those changes [*state-society interactions*] in terms of the expansion and institutionalization of a third space, without being drawn into a simplistic dichotomization between state and society. We can even speak of the state-ification or societalization of portions of that space (to take up the hints from Habermas’s analysis of the structural transformation of the public sphere), without collapsing it into either state or society (Huang, 1993, p. 225; italic added).

As a result of the above-mentioned four features, the Residents Committee can thus be considered an important component of this third realm. Reducing the committee to being strictly a part of either the state or civil society oversimplifies the functions and place of the organization in Chinese politics. Such reductionist thinking thus ignores and obscures the most dynamic, profuse, and unique interactions that are part of the process of

grassroots transformation. This is perhaps a major fault of either the purely state-centered or society-centered approach to discussing local politics. While acknowledging that both approaches contribute elements of truth, this project supports a trichotomous schema that also recognizes the amphibian nature of the organization.

Certainly, I am not suggesting that the state-society antithesis is prescriptively inferior to trichotomous thinking. The “dichotomy vs. trichotomy” distinction simply refers to disagreement about which tools should be employed in deciding “what is taken into consideration and what is left out, what weight is assigned to one factor as against another, which sets of interrelationships are assumed to exist and which will go largely unnoticed” (Inkeles, 1971, p. 419). These choices are not determined by any pre-convictions (or they should not be, anyway) but ultimately by the particular dynamics of situations that exist on the ground (i.e., their ability to capture the richness of the context, to sense the nuance, and to adapt time and location).

This binary schema frames most contemporary Chinese state-society debates in one way or another, whether explicitly or implicitly. Engaging in this kind of thinking has become particularly tempting in the reform era where political authoritarianism and economic/social openness coexist. As an analytical tool, the binary schema tends to induce some intuitively plausible yet empirically debatable propositions, including the idea (1) that being is composed of two elements; and (2) that the two elements are mutually exclusive and even conflictive, and hence that they are always in dichotomous opposition to each other. Applying this kind of thinking onto the complexity of reality in a wholesale way often leads those who apply it as such to an additional leap of logic; that being the

idea that reality needs to be primarily understood from the duality of its dichotomous components. This is the potential fallacy associated with the concise but sometimes oversimplified idiom of binary thinking.

While scholarly attention is drawn to debating whose influence is greater, the state's or the society's, we run the risk of neglecting scrutiny of the underlying assumption, that being the monolithicity of the state-society dichotomy. In most cases, this assumption is not thought to be an assumption at all; it is assumed to be too axiomatic even to be subjected to debate at all. Given all this, then, let us bring this investigation back around. Are we merely acknowledging the committee as being a creature of the state, or, at the other extreme, are we regarding it as the result of processes of social development? Does Chinese political reality, as we have thus far discussed it, support this either-or scenario? More importantly, to what extent does binary logic help us to address the central query here being discussed: how can we best describe the grassroots state-society relationship in urban China? This study has found that the committee is not strictly an appendage in the state's apparatus of control nor is it the result of evolutionary processes of social transformation. We have to refer to both sides of this argument in order to really understand the organization and its ultimately amphibian nature. Any such approach is destined of course to be something of a balancing act, but it is this just this kind of approach that is best able to capture the dynamic grassroots relationship that exists between the state and society in today's China.

Examining the Residents Committee as an amphibian creature provides a new perspective because it focuses on the interactive dependency that exists between

movements of both social and political development in China, and it does not become trapped in any kind of distilled dichotomization. This new perspective is promising not only because it increases understanding of urban neighborhood politics, but also because of the widespread existence of go-between organizations that are similar to the Residents Committee in China. The most obvious alternative is the committee's rural cousin, the Villagers Committee, which also 'intermediates' between the state and peasants. While the Residents Committee plays a key role in urban grassroots management, the Villagers Committee has extremely visible influence in the countryside.¹²² The Villagers Committee's equally ambiguous status has spurred intense debate about its own nature. Some of the observers mentioned above treat it as a new kind of grassroots organization which might be a harbinger of nascent democratization in rural China, while others dismiss it as being an instrument of the continuation of state-dominated politics (Kennedy, 2002; O'Brien and Li, 2000). This indeterminacy concerning the nature of the Villagers Committee suggests the possibility of losing genuinely important information. Indeed, this may well happen if we ignore the ambiguity and complexity of the organization by haphazardly employing the binary state-or-society schema.

Another type of neighborhood organization that is closely related to the Residents Committee is the homeowners' committees that are becoming more and more common in commercialized urban communities in China. According to the recently released Property Management Bylaw [*wuye guanli tiaoli*] on September 1, 2003, a homeowners committee

¹²² The Villagers Committee controls most economic resources that are crucial to peasants, such as land, irrigation, school, and road. In contrast, urban residents show much weaker dependence upon the Residents Committee in terms of basic social and economic welfare.

consists of several property owner representatives whose main responsibility is to monitor the consistent fulfillment of the property management company's service contract obligations to property owners. Although the homeowners committee is limited in terms of operational jurisdiction to the area of property management issues, the Bylaw stipulates that it has to attend to the guidance and supervision faculties of the local Residents Committee.¹²³ While acknowledging the potential of the homeowners' committee to contribute to Chinese democratization at the grassroots level, Read (2003) also finds that it has an amphibious nature that is similar to that attributed to the Residents Committee in this project:

For the most part, the organizers [of the home-owners committees] did not regard their actions as part of a project of general democratization. They are usually cautious about offending the government and generally appear willing to cooperate with local officials and police on many everyday administrative matters, whether to assure them of their loyalty or because they have no quarrel with the idea of working closely with the state (Read, 2003, p. 59).

Besides the Villagers Committee and the homeowners committee, White (1993) discovered ten types of "social organizations" [*shehui tuanti*] with amphibious characteristics existing inside the urban ecology of a coastal city in China. He found that these organizations constituted "a crucial communications channel between a state organ and the organization's members, thereby helping the state to get across ideological points or specific policies" (White, 1993b, p. 79).¹²⁴ These organizations extend the reach of the

¹²³ The number of the homeowners committees is relatively few and their real impacts are still not clear. The two completely privately owned communities I visited, the Jingtai Community and the Simmiao Condominium, have not established their homeowners committees yet. It is interesting to see the future status of this new organization in neighborhood governance, particularly its relationship with the Residents Committee and local governments.

¹²⁴ They include political, economic, science and technology, arts, culture, social welfare, social clubs, public affairs, health, and sports.

state, providing a critical mechanism of coordination. Additionally, these organizations also look significantly like embryonic forms of civil society, according to White's reckoning. Unger (1996, pp. 819-819) finds that the Federation of Industry & Commerce, a newly emerged business association in Beijing representing large private interests, has neither reached the degree of independence from state domination nor the degree of input from below that is generally associated with societal corporatism. Instead, it provides a critical coordinating mechanism between the state and its members.

Similar organizations of ambiguous status have also been widely documented to exist and operate in many other areas of Chinese social and political life. For example, Chinese economic reform has been widely interpreted to be a state-initiated process in which many business players have maintained close connections to many entities of governments (Liu, 1992; Oi, 1986; Solinger, 1992; Yang, 1989). Even many private enterprises, which have traditionally been considered to have clear division lines with the state display some amphibian characteristics.

In brief, many non-state businesses have state or collective bodies as their supervisors, party-state officials as their bosses, and official institutions as their profit-sharers. The intricate interlocking of government and business in China makes it difficult for some scholars to determine whether the type of enterprises recently established is in the 'state' or in 'society' (Ding, 1994, p. 312).

Furthermore, scholars also find similar institutional ambiguity in labor unions (Zhang, 1997), religious organizations (Dean, 1997), universities (Hayhoe and Zhong, 1997), and even some state-run institutions, such as those of the media (Ding, 1994) and the Women's Federation (Howell, 1996).

While it might be true that not all such organizations can be called “amphibian organizations,” as in the case of the Residents Committee, their dual characteristics span the state-society spectrum and qualify them as at least quasi-amphibian organizations. And these participate in a large amount of state-society interactions. A key conclusion of this project is that the Residents Committee needs to be interpreted by its structural connections to both the state and residents. It suggests that those organizations with ambiguous status might be better understood if we treat them as intermediaries rather than as surrogates of either the state or society. By focusing on the linkages and interactions between these intermediaries, it is contended here that we can come away with a better understanding of the intricacy of the state-society relationship in contemporary China.

State and Chinese State-Society Relations

The second line of inquiry addressed by this study involves the reevaluation of the role of the Chinese state in the process of social construction. This investigation suggests that greater attention should be paid to the state, not regarding its activities or tendencies that have curbed the development of civil society, but instead regarding its formative and directive role in social construction. There is a clear distinction between Western and Chinese conceptions of the state, and these distinct conceptions need to be attended to. The Chinese state has successfully built and communicated an effective moral subconsciousness over its past three millennia of authoritarian history. That is, it has conveyed itself as a necessity of public interest and a paternalistic super-arbitrator and director. For ordinary Chinese, there is no “bad” state, but only “bad” rulers who usurp and abuse the power of the state. Compared with the Western tradition, where social demands

for representation within and against the state have been key elements of moral conviction, the Chinese state carries a far more salient role in constructing the moral world inside which it is itself interpreted.

In China, ... the concept of society as a locus of legitimate public action has little moral terrain on which to stand that has not already been appropriated by the state or effectively delegitimized by state ideology (Brook, 1997, p. 20).

The sanctity of the state fundamentally frames the political development of China. It also effectively blocks the emergence of alternatives that would suggest different ways that the state and society should be associated. However, the formative and commanding state in the Chinese context is easily distorted and misplaced in the liberal mantra. The mantra largely adopts a view that polarizes society against the state. This derives from a belief that society is larger and morally more legitimate than the state or is superior to the state. This Western concept has its own unique history and intellectual context of formation. In particular, the concept in its most popular manifestation denotes the necessity for there to be a counterbalancing element to the state in order for a functioning democracy to exist, or in order for a viable transition to democracy to take place.

The distinction between civil society and the state is indeed important to the Western history, but more especially because it has been central to the different forms of counter-absolutist thinking. Indeed, it owes its existence and relevance to the development in the West of reforming absolutism, of what has been called “the well-ordered police state” in the 17th and 18th centuries. It made no more sense in the context of the *polis*, or the mediaeval polity, than it did in a host of traditional non-Western polities (Taylor, 1990, pp. 115-116).

Indeed, the prominent status of the state in China can be extended to characterize a common political pattern in East Asia, that of an Asian communitarianism that significantly differs from the state-society division that has developed in the West. In East

Asian countries, “the greater good was ideally manifested in a consensus overseen by the moral authority of the leadership, reflected in a moralistic father-knows-best paternalism” (Unger and Chan, 1995, p. 33). The division between the state and society and the assertion of independent moral decision, upheld by the Western tradition, is often portrayed as disharmonious and selfish in East Asia. Dependent relations between society and the state are morally desirable and thus perpetuated in countries like China.

In Neo-Confucian societies where the public sphere has been created by and from the state and not from the private sphere there remain few limits to the state and there are few opportunities for individuals to play multiple roles (such as the ‘role’ of the independent citizen) in Asian society. They cannot easily ‘drop out.’ They are always expected to behave as political participants in their communities, and the state has a right to intrude into their ‘private lives’ in ways which the hypothesized, individualistic, capitalist-liberal democratic citizen would not accept (Australian-Asian Perceptions Project, 1993, p. 8).

Therefore, applying the concept of civil society to China without critically acknowledging the above distinction might incur two potential fallacies. First, it shifts the authoritarian state from being a presiding player over society to being a target that is subject to revolt from the social bottom, whether that revolt be peaceful or confrontational. Second, it downplays the proportional amount of the state’s strategic power in the state-society construction. Many analysts have probably been surprised by the resilience of the Chinese state’s legitimacy and relevancy in the post reform era. Their surprise is understandable insofar as both of the above fallacies are particularly alluring, especially as they have appeared to work as explanations for democratic development in recent times. Indeed, civil society has demonstrated tremendous transformative capacity in the cases of some of the former communist states of Eastern Europe. It is not clear to what extent these states enjoyed the moral legitimacy and/or the anticipated superiority over society that the

Chinese state does. But one thing is certain: The Chinese state is not merely a target of transformation; it is indeed a dominantly formative force in the state-society construction.

Civil Society and Chinese State-Society Relations

The third line of investigation in this project directly relates to the concept of civil society. Did or does China possess civil society? This question is of key importance in transplanting the concept of civil society to China. If the answer is negative, the transplantation becomes baseless, except as a tool of moral critique for a “China’s responses to the West” mentality (Farquhar and Hevia, 1992). Frankly, this type of moral critique, driven by ideological convictions rather than facts, is useless for understanding the reality of what is actually happening in China. This is why the liberal school tries hard to rake Chinese society for positive evidence of civil society.

The search for civil society in China peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s and has kept its momentum ever since. A typical and perhaps debatable finding thus far has been that an embryonic or approximated civil society has existed in China at least since the time of the last Chinese imperial era, the Qing Empire (1644-1911). Rowe (1984a and 1984b), whose works are considered milestones in the excavation of China for civil society, champions this trend. He finds that Hankou, one of the early cities exposed to and assimilated to European cultural norms in the mid 19th century, “had come to look very like the familiar Western conception of preindustrial, urban, commercial capitalist society,” as a result of a “general trend toward social and economic pluralism” (Rowe, 1984a, pp. 120-121). This vibrant society showed “the steady development of organized, corporate-style civil action and the proliferation of a wide range of philanthropic and

public service institutions,” including organizations like guilds and guild federations, local gentry, and various merchants (Rowe, 1984b, p. 5).

This discovery is exciting for the liberal school in part because it reaffirms the tandem extant facts of a capitalist economy and social and political openness.¹²⁵ If civil society dated as far back as the imperial Qing Empire, why should we not expect the continued rise of civil society today when the conditions have been much improved for it vis-à-vis political and sociological openness? Standing on this liberal position, such expectation gives no cause for more criticism. However, the question itself, “Did or does China possess civil society?” is immersed in the hidden values that underlie the concept of civil society. If compelled or obliged by those values, we would fall into the trap of unwary positivism. We may assume the Western experiences as a matter of course, which would then transcend the different social and political paths that different cultures, countries, and contexts. Pushed to extreme, the whole process of ‘discovering’ civil society in China becomes nothing more than the application of an assumed universal norm onto a context that is essentially distinct from the one where the original norm emerged.

To be fair, this project has found elements of civil society in China, such as neighborhood senior associations and diversionary clubs. But their activities cannot represent what really matters in grassroots state-society interactions. There is a qualitative distinction between these isolated civil elements and a civil society, which we often define as the totality of widespread similar organizations or institutions that are strong enough to assert influence over social development and the public interest. The attempt to “discover”

¹²⁵ Some even argue that the liberal tradition, which is equivalent to Western civil society, has existed long before the Qing Empire, as part of Chinese culture (Bary, 1983).

a functioning civil society in contemporary China might risk taking an irrelevant and fictitious direction away from the reality of social and political development at the urban grassroots level. Its imaginative existence can only be treated as a heuristic instrument invented after the fact for positivist purposes.

In reality, the absence of civil society fundamentally challenges the concept's utility. For those positivists who adhere to the liberal mantra, it will not be easy to admit that the concept is neither a factual entity nor an established political institution in China. However, even the most ardent advocates agree that this presumed Chinese civil society, if it is real, dramatically falls short of what it should be. Being that it is indisputable that Chinese society is nothing close to being self-generating, self-supporting, and autonomous from the state, the persistence of some to "discover" civil society in China can only be interpreted as either priggish or wishful thinking. William Rowe later admitted that moral advocacy underlay his construction of civil society in later imperial China.

My own persistent attempt to describe later imperial Chinese society in terms of the European historiographic construction 'early modern' has not met with universal approval (Rowe, 1993, p. 140).

The proscriptive term "civil society" has led to biased interpretations of ambiguous evidence, even if it has been unintended as such; and teleological suggestions have surfaced that seem antithetical to the overall picture.

The concept [*civil society*] is at once too value laden and too under-defined to be effective use, and consequently the outcome of any search to discover (or invent) it in China can amount to little more than passing a blanket value judgment on the Chinese past, based on expectations generated, justifiably or not, from our own local experience (Rowe, 1993, p. 154; italic added).

The above concerns go to the heart of the paradigmatic transplantation. How do we treat the value system(s) underlying our inquiry? Any political theory, regardless of its ostensibly value-neutral claim, is bounded with normative value(s), as is any political researcher. What matters here is whether the researcher is straightforward with his moral bias, whether he explicitly or implicitly proceeds from intuitive presumptions or from empirical study, and how the evidence incongruent to his moral conviction is handled and interpreted. While no one really debates the constitutive value of civil society to the Western democracies, the argument that the concept then acquires universal validity is deeply questionable. Even more questionable is the indiscriminate application of this prescriptive concept as heuristic guidance onto a country with a very unique history and with very distinct social, cultural, and political features.

Since the fade-out of the capitalism vs. socialism debate of the early 1990s, the liberal mantra has naturally acquired a paradigmatic status in contemporary political inquiry. The tandem relationship of the market economy and democracy persists as a core assumption of the liberal mantra, although it has received much criticism (Huntington, 1968). When applied to state-society studies, the prescription easily falls under two types of teleological logic. First, the liberal mantra maintains that a penetrative state will give rise to a thriving civil society. It has done so in some countries, and will eventually do so in others. This logic openly identifies itself with the moral purpose of the liberal mantra and it is clear exactly where it is headed. The second logic is subtler and is disguised with ostensibly “value-neutral” labels, and is therefore more commonly seen in research. It maintains that civil society will inevitably be present subsequent to the emergence of one

element—a market economy. If the process did not happen before, it will eventually. This logic reduces the complex and organic process of political development to being dependent on a singular, covariate (if not causal) relationship between an economic system and civil society.

While both lines of logic advocate different arguments, they stem from the same prescription encapsulated in a three-way relationship: the three partners are a liberalized economy in harness with the rise of civil society independent from the state, and incipient democracy. The idea of civil society thus carries too many teleological and reductionist implications. Without being conscious of this fact, we run the risk of seeing the Chinese reality as a mirror image of the reality experienced by the West. In the face of just such a risk is where the China Paradox can sound the alarm. The China Paradox contributes a real phenomenon that the liberal mantra would assume to be a contradiction. It exposes and perhaps even challenges the underlying assumptions regarding the empirical validity of the liberal mantra's universal application. Specifically, the China Paradox challenges paradigmatic transplantation by questioning the assumed economic-political tandem; that is, why has China established a market economy yet seen little indication of a rising civil society? This empirical contradiction helps elicit critical reflection of the often unspoken assumptions behind the liberal mantra.

If this project can provide any insight in this direction, it is in its illustration of the incongruence of the pattern observed with the liberal mantra. It does this by exploring a segment of the state-society relationship—that being the arena of neighborhood politics as found around the entity of the Residents Committee. The committee is a type of unnoticed

organization in state-society studies that can better emancipate one from moral attachments than the more macro and politically sensitive institutions can. The dense and often fuzzy evidence found at the urban grassroots level challenges the well-developed and straightforward paradigmatic conviction that civil society rises in concert with the process of economic liberalization. It opens up the possibility of there being a fresh interpretation without the constraints of a presumed position. It helps open a window on the China Paradox through which empirical reality contradictory to the dominant paradigm can be and is in fact perceived... and hopefully conceptualized more and more adequately as the window becomes larger.

During my last conversation with Ms. Li Lan in her home shortly before I wrapped up the field trip, I asked about her personal plan for the future. Surprisingly, she decided to retire as the director of the Deji Residents Committee in 2006. According to the Pudong Street Office, all fourteen committees, including the Deji, should be directly elected in 2006. The street office prefers local residents in new committees, although outsiders like Ms. Li Lan could still serve if they received enough votes. Given Ms. Li Lan's reputation and previous performance, she would not have had to worry about her post in the coming election. Indeed, she assured me that was not the reason forcing her to go. What drove her decision was work fatigue. She told me,

Community affairs are very exhausting. I have worked here for more than seven years, and I increasingly feel 'my ability not equal to my ambition' [*libu congxin*]. The government exerts constant pressure for better quality of service. Meanwhile, you are facing endless requests from residents. I have done a lot. However, I always feel much more lies ahead. There have been too many changes over the years. I am too tired to handle any more. I 'have a clear conscience' [*wenxin wukui*]

and can face the government and residents without the slightest guilt. But I will be 52 in 2006 and cannot endure 'toss and turn' [*zheteng*] any more.

Unlike the vigorous and ambitious character she displayed at her workplace, her voice turned to being somewhat weary when she began discussing her future. The pressure from the heavy workload has certainly contributed to her fatigue, but the uncertainty involved with the future of the committee has clearly imposed even more influence on her. She personally did not agree with the across-the-board approach to adopting direct election for all committees in 2006. Given apathy from many residents, she worried that direct election would only become a perfunctory show without producing a substantive boost for the committee's performance. Indeed, she told me several times about her disapproval of the newly direct elected Shiyuan Residents Committee, considering it to be not so useful.

Perhaps constrained by overconfidence in her committee's performance or the instinctive opposition that all men and women have to new developments, Ms. Li Lan was somewhat reluctant to recognize the rather salient and meaningful changes that have taken place in the Shiyuan Residents Committee. Apparently, she was faintly aware of the predicament wherein the coming changes would challenge her way of operating the committee about which she felt so much pride. Being a government employee, Ms. Li Lan always seemed to maintain some sense of superiority over ordinary residents and particularly over the rest of committee members. Her official background also facilitated the management of her committee and neighborhood affairs. However, direct election will put her fate in the hands of Deji residents. To compete with some ordinary residents in 2006 for the director position she had already held for so long would be a personal embarrassment, if not a minor assault. If she loses in the election for whatever reason, that

would be an even greater humiliation. Therefore, although regrettable, resignation by 2006 might be a real relief for her physically as well as psychologically. This scenario certainly seems to be preferable to her stepping into what she sees to be an adventure in “self-negation.”

Ms. Li Lan’s decision partially reflects her silent opposition to what she deemed as the unnecessary but imminent policy of direct election initiated by the street office. However, she might not realize that the policy is only one puny episode of a much wider and more profound transformational drama that is taking place in China: i.e. the realignment of the state-society relationship that must be undergone so as to cope with deepening economic liberalization and persistent political authoritarianism. Thanks to the burst of reform era commercialization, Chinese cities have never been as dynamic and expansive—or as stratified and volatile—as they are today. Opportunities march abreast with crises as the “market beast” collides with the once stagnant and tightly controlled urban society of China. Many urban residents have been witness to the rapid advancement of their quality of lives; yet, considerable social and economic problems also have arisen in the cities, those such as are presented by increased crime, unemployment, and the floating population. Ever since the reform era got underway, the state has helped unleash the energy inherent to Chinese society. However, the process that was set in motion at the beginning of the reform era is now imposing increasingly poignant challenges on its own sustainability. The total and comfortable control over society that the state once had has been gradually dissolved, as commercialization has eroded the social and political functions of the various working units that were once the basis of urban control. The

diminishing state is facing a rapidly growing but tension-charged society. Both of the actors in this problem, however, need to adjust to what is occurring and prepare for what lies ahead. Their relationship (and its realignment) will be key for the continued development of the country.

What faces Ms. Li Lan is direct election, a particular policy change that most Residents Committees, such as the Jingtai and Huashan, will not encounter soon. However, since they are amphibian organizations located between the state and urban residents, they will all be put in the teeth of the same beast of transformation that was discussed above. In this sense, Ms. Li Lan's uncertainty towards her committee essentially involves the larger question of acclimating the committee to the rapidly changing urban environment so that it may continue to be a viable channel for the interests of both the state and urban society.

The committee is the key "middleman" between the state and residents in cities, one whose logic can only be understood by looking to its interactions. Looking back on the history of the Residents Committee, it is easy to see that the committee was primarily an instrument of social control when the party-state nearly penetrated society completely. Rapid commercialization has today insulated society from the state's total domination, which in turn has contributed to the rapid expansion of the purview of the committee. The four committees in this project perform rather unique combinations of functionalities so as to link urban governments with local residents. Because of this, it is clear that the committee displays much more ambiguity and complexity today than it did before. It truly is a reflection of the multiple possibilities stemming from the broad-based transformation in which the forces of social/economic openness and political authoritarianism are

attempting to reconcile themselves to each other in the context of contemporary China. If any prediction were to be made, a well-known “platitude” that many members of the Residents Committees cite repeatedly might provide a useful clue as to the what the future may hold for this amphibian organization and for the grassroots state-society relationship in China: “From above, the government’s concerns are ours, and from below, the difficulties of every man are ours to help them through” [*shang wei zhengfu fenyou; xia wei baixing jienan*].

Glossary of Terms

ARR: Assembly of Residential Representatives

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CDR: Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (Cuba)

HPMC: Huaxia Property Management Company

MCA: Ministry of Civil Affairs

MIA: Ministry of Internal Affairs

NPC: National People's Congress

PRC: People's Republic of China

SWS: Social Work Station

YMCA: Chinese Young Men's Christian Association of Tianjin City

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