

The Emerging Urban Grassroots Democracy: A Case Study of Community Building and Neighborhood Activism in Shanghai¹

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In response to the rapid urbanization and socio-economic reforms since the 1990s, China's mega city of Shanghai has initiated a number of institutional reforms in the scheme of "Urban Community Building" [*shequ jianshe*]. In particular, an elected neighborhood council system has been built upon the gatekeeper institution of Resident Committee [*jumin weiyuanhui*] and reinstalled into the neighborhood space. Contrasted with traditional bureaucratic governing arrangement, this community organizing effort is envisioned to increase residents' engagement in grassroots political process with a deliberative and participatory fashion.

This paper draws the experience of "Urban Community Building" in Shanghai to illustrate whether and how state policy can generate bottom-up neighborhood activism which is heralded by the grassroots democracy theorists. Our case study demonstrates that comprehensive urban community building creates network resources and meaningful participation venues for the local residents to articulate neighborhood interests and engage with each other. Neighborhood level political change and grassroots engagement in post reform Shanghai proves that state-side governing setting can be an important source of the emerging grassroots democracy in authoritarian context.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, there has been a growing strain of community politics focusing on the merits of grassroots engagement in increasing the governing performance, deepening the democratic politics, and promoting economic prosperity (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Baum, 1997; Berry and Thomson, 1993; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Fukuyama, 1995; Mark and Rattling, 2001). While proponents of community politics in this camp vary, a general claim is that

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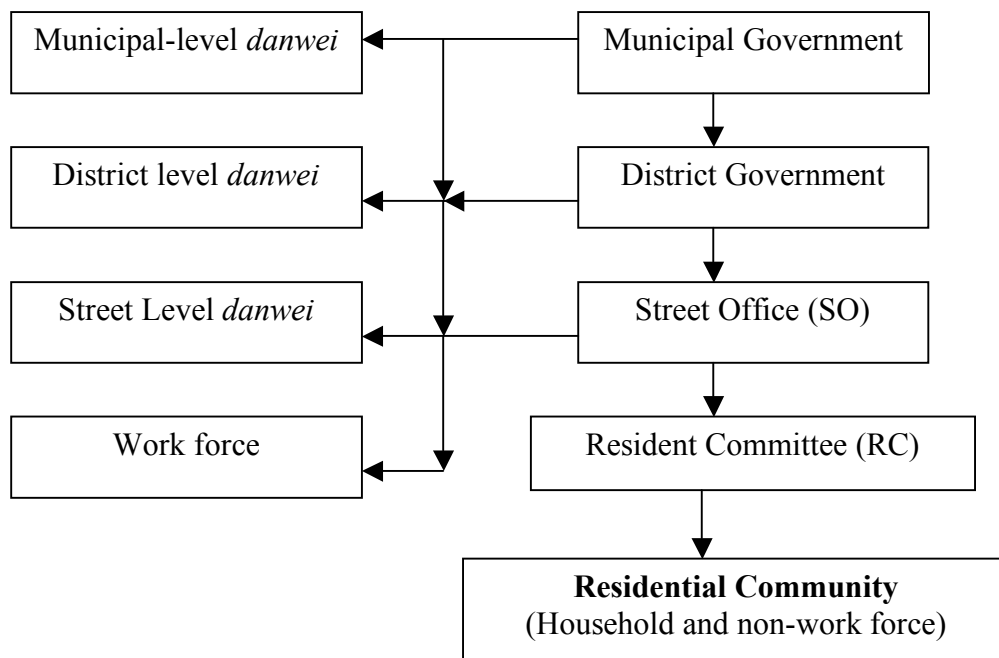
community building and basic level civic engagement are the solutions to social cohesion deficit and community disintegration (Fattore et al. 2003: 116).

While much of the prior literature has focused on the pattern of civic engagement and activism in liberal democracies, less work has been done on neighborhood settings as building blocks of grassroots democracy in the authoritarian context. This paper draws evidence from the neighborhood governance reform in the city of Shanghai to illustrate whether and how state-initiated institutional building promotes community engagement in post reform China. It begins with a brief description of “Urban Community Building” policies in Shanghai since 1996. Then a *prima facie* case study will be presented on the process of Resident Committee (RC, hereafter) election and how it nourishes various forms of neighborhood activism. The paper ends with a discussion on the political implications of neighborhood activism to the overarching Party-state regime of China.

URBAN COMMUNITY BUILDING IN SHANGHAI

The sociopolitical order in contemporary Shanghai, much like other Chinese cities, has been established with two principles: the first is *functional* in the form of the work unit (*danwei*) system based on employment; the second is a *geographical* one based on the place of residence (Salaff 1967; 1971). Seeing from the governing structure angle, the city is divided into municipalities [*shi*] and districts [*qu*] and these in turn sub-divided into Street Offices [*jiedao banshichu*], Residents Committees [*jumin weiyuanhui*], and finally into residents’ small groups [*jumin xiaozu*]. At the bottom of this governing framework, the institution of Resident Committee functions as an elementary geographical interface between the government bureaucracy and its constituents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Organizational System in Urban Shanghai²



As stated in the Organic Law of Residents' Committee of People's Republic of China (revised in 1994), the primary tasks of Resident Committees include the maintenance of sociopolitical order and providing social services such as sanitation, basic welfare for the handicapped and disadvantaged, literacy education and mediation of civil disputes. Through the RC system, the state reaches deep into the grassroots fabric with an immense governing network. Over half a century since the RC system was built, RC has served as the primary agent of the state in facilitating the social and economic transformation of the localities under their jurisdiction (Pan 2002).

Rapid urbanization and deep socio-economic reforms since the 1990s have created very different conditions for grassroots politics in urban China. With the process of "dedanweilization", housing privatization and the emerging less-regulated urban spaces, Chinese urban society has evolved in directions too diverse to be controlled by the Party or government

² There has been a steady growth of the number of RCs during the urban community building process. To take a snapshot, in 1996, there were 3,043 RCs. In the year of 1999, this number increased to more than 3,700. See Lin et al. (2002) and Shanghai Almanac Editorial Board (2000).

ensorship (Davis et al. 1995). To meet the organized bottom-up challenges associated with these dynamics³, the Shanghai government has sought to restructure urban society from below and showcase democracy by revitalizing the RC institution. In the rubric of “Urban Community Building”, this local reorganization has gone through two significant phases. From 1996 to 1999, administration networking on the Street Office (SO, hereafter) level was promoted; since 1999, the policy has gone deep into the RC level to deliberately restructure the neighborhood life and establish the so-called “the fourth network” of the urban power.

“Two Layers of Government, Three Layers of Administration”

The extensive Urban Community Building in Shanghai was brought on by a citywide meeting in 1996, where the Municipal Government decided to establish a new governing framework of “two layers of government, three layers of administration” [*liangji zhengfu, sanji guanli*]. This scheme firstly proposed to convert SO from a subordinated agency [*paicu jigou*] of the district government to a more locally based governing agency with a comprehensive set of regulatory functions. It is stipulated that the administration area of each SO should be reconfigured and standardized as 5 Square Kilo Meters (or about 100,000 residents). Second, on manpower resources, the official quota of SO’s “approved positions” [*bianzhi*] of public servants [*gongwu yuan*] is increased from 55 to 60.⁴ Third, to change the previous marginal status in the urban government, SO is granted with more autonomous financial resources with a new street-level fiscal system. The district government should be responsible to fund SO through fiscal transferring.

Building upon this policy scheme, the “Code of Street Office in Shanghai” was promulgated by the People’s Congress of Shanghai in 1997. Elaborated in that Code, SO should

³ “Dedanweilization” refers to *danwei* reforms which bringing considerable weakness of political control over the workforce with the dismantling of previous work units (You, 1998: 23-28). For the discussions of sociopolitical impact of *danwei* reform, see Lü and Perry (1997). Among the aspects of *danwei* reform, privatization of housing provision has posed a direct impact on the state-resident relationship. For analysis about housing privatization policy and its social impacts in urban China, see (Wang and Murie, 1999).

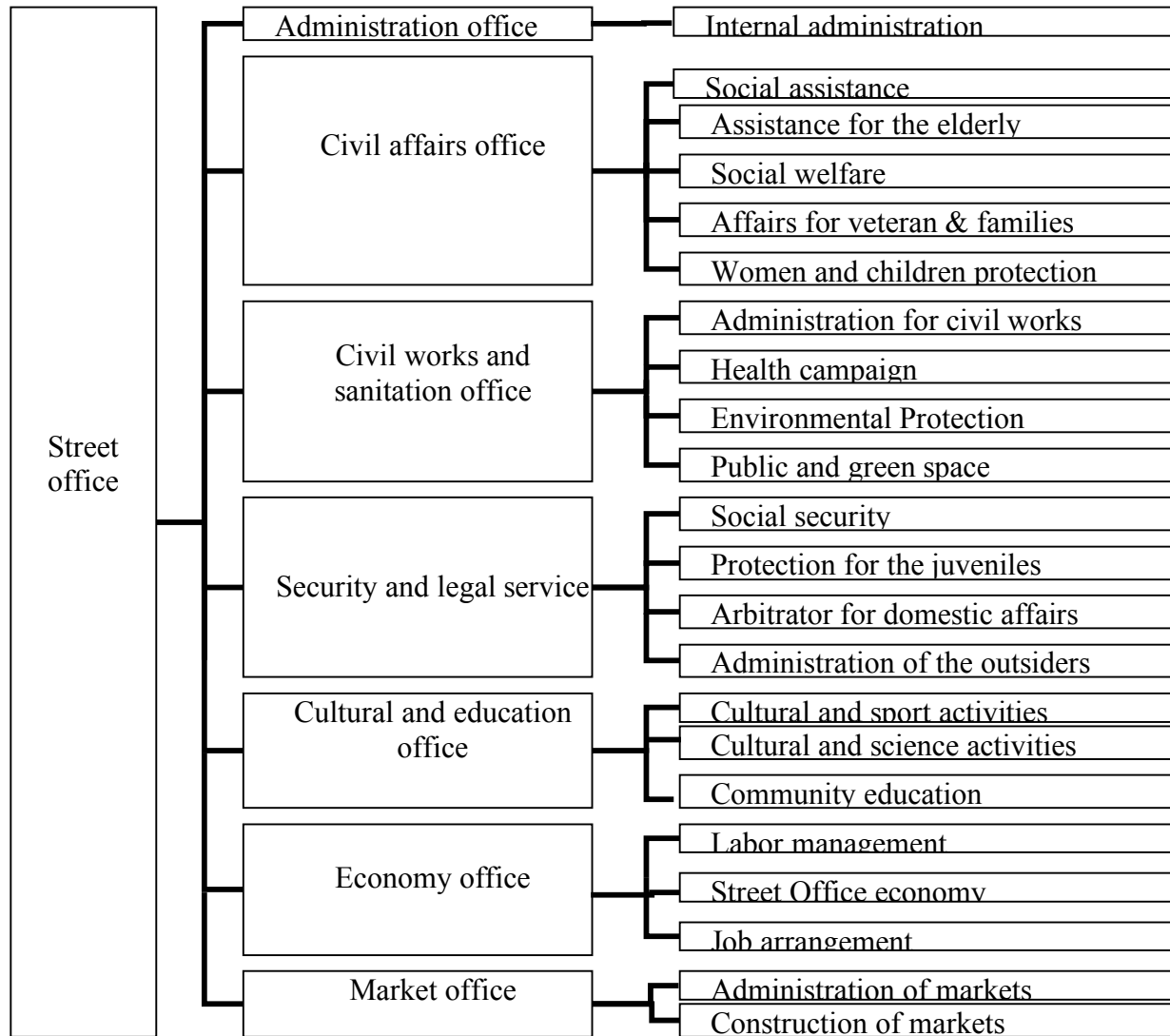
⁴ SO and RC staff is generally labeled as “grassroots cadre” [*jiceng ganbu*], which actually includes three basic positions: one is “administrative position” [*xingzheng bianzhi*] constituted by “public servant” [*gongwuyuan*]; the second is “Party management position” [*dangwu bianzhi*] partly composed by *gongwuyuan*; the final type is “service unit position” [*shiye bianzhi*]. Cadres of RC fall completely into the last category of service unit position. These positions are formal party of the state’s personnel system. Neighborhood activists who volunteers to engage in RC’s work with enthusiasm and elected RC members are not formally regarded as cadres. However, “service unit position” [*shiye bianzhi*] may be provided to some of the employed staffs of RC.

formally take up a wide range of responsibilities: directing and assisting RC in its organizational and institutional building, organizing community service, developing street-level economy and so on. Given that there is no established legislative power in the SO, the Code specially emphasizes the importance of “street-level resident representative meeting”, through which SO’s decision makings are subject to be deliberated and supervised by the residents.

Under the “two layers of government and three layers of administration” system, SO has undergone a set of internal changes in its governing framework. As shown in Wuliqiao SO, Luwan District, various street agencies under the district government have been networked and subject to the coordination of SO. These agencies include the legal assistance office, the business and commercial administration office, the streetscape maintenance team and the real-estate administration office. SO is responsible for the nomination and evaluation of officials in public security, housing management, business and retail administration and directly appoints the head of the Sanitation and Hygiene Office. In order to further strengthen the administration of SO, the Luwan district government devolves to the SO a number of regulatory functions including approval of the residential plan, the housing development plan and the completion of housing projects, site occupation licensing, outdoor advertisement management, the licensing of restaurants and catering services operated by private businesspersons, and penalties for illegal construction (Wu 2002).⁵ Figure 2 describes a typical innovated structure of SO in Shanghai, which usually undertakes more than 150 routine administrative functions.

⁵ Based on his ethnographic study in Wuliqiao SO, Zhu (1999) conceptualizes this policy process as “local administration building”. For more comprehensive empirical evidences about the “two layers of government, three layers of administration” policy in Shanghai, see Shi and Pan et al. (1998).

Figure 2 The Innovated Framework of Street Office in Shanghai



It is noteworthy that the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also stretched its local power into that system. In June 1997, the Shanghai CCP Committee issued the “Policy Suggestions on Strengthening and Improving Community-based Party Building”, defined “community Party building” [*shequ dangjian*] as “a localized Party building strategy which bulked by CCP Committees in SO and RC, engaged by all the other Party cells which are located in the SO administrative area. The suggestion calls attention to the significance of community-

based party power to ensure the consolidation of CCP as a Ruling Party” (Cf. Xu et al. 2000: 329).⁶

“The Fourth Layer of Network”

On the RC level, progressive reforms have been directed to revitalize the RC and make it effective in mobilizing residents and other community-based actors. In 1998, “The Experimental Project of Strengthening Resident Committee Management” was formulated by the Municipal Government. This project aims to promote mass participation on the grassroots public affairs and develop a governing network centered by RC and nested in the urban administration.

One of the most attractive measures of revitalizing RC is to recruit professional full-time local staff to replace those old and uneducated “granny cadres” in the RC. Many full-time cadres have been recruited from formerly cadres in state-owned enterprises where economic reforms resulted in reduction of employees. Passing the governmental qualification examinations and training courses, they are hired by the SO normally as secretaries of CCP’s neighborhood branch or as directors of RCs. In Yangpu district, for example, 87 full-time secretaries were appointed to the neighborhood Party branch in 2001, while 80% of the CCP secretaries in neighborhood were working in full-time mode. In addition, an average of 30,000 RMB was annually allocated to every RC across the city. This has provided sufficient financial supports to the everyday working of RCs (Peng 2001).

Apart from making RC staff energetic and resourceful, more meaningful strategy to revitalize the RC institution is to promote resident initiatives in the neighborhood political process. Early in 1996, the Yinhang SO in Yangpu District launched a governance innovation by organizing a “Community Deliberating Board” [*shequ xieshang weiyuanhui*] consisting of 120 full-time professional RC staffers and representatives nominated by the residents (see also Lin 2002). Beginning in 1999, for the first time in Shanghai’s history, more or less open RC

⁶ In practice, various measures have been adopted for Party cell reinvigorating. A popular strategy for this is establishing “the Joint Meeting of Community Party Building” [*Shequ dangjian lianxi huiyi*], which aims to align organizational resources from danweis and other neighborhood actors located in street community. In addition, to strengthen the Party leadership in the community organizations, the Party’s Mass Organizations including trade union, women’s federation and youth league have also established their community extensions. The systematic Party organizational sprawl as such has brought a new dynamics to the community political process.

elections were held to establish a new neighborhood council system.⁷ The system is conceived to promote neighborhood direct participation, cultivate a spirit of voluntarism and communitarian, and ultimately, enhance the sense of community belonging.

The Politics of Neighborhood Activism: A Prima facie case study

This section steps into the case of Yuanzhu neighborhood in Pudong New District to examine how RC is reorganized through neighborhood election and how does this reform impact the community activism. Yuanzhu is a prototype residential block administrated by Weifang SO in Pudong.⁸ The neighborhood is a home to more than 3,500 residents who have private homeownerships in 1,319 households. It is composed with 72 housing blocks and covers 0.12 square kilos meters. In 1999, Yuanzhu neighborhood was one of the first round experimental cases of RC election in Shanghai.

The Policies of Neighborhood Election

For the 1999 YZ RC reform, the Pudong district government and Weifang SO formulated establish a framework for new RC institution in “the Scheme of Resident Committee Reform in Pudong New District” (PD Scheme, hereafter). Building up the Organization Law of Urban Resident Committee, this document specifies the new RC’s nature, functions and internal organizational structures. Table 1 compares the RC functions stipulated by the Organizational Law and Pudong scheme. The highlighted item from No. 6 to No. 11 in the lower right column shows that the new RC is expected to shift from the previous substantive administrative tasks, and to bring the “socialist democratic nature of RC” back into the neighborhood politics.⁹

⁷ Shanghai is a pioneer of RC election in China. Following Shanghai, Beijing announced in May 2000 that it would sanction “open and fair” elections for members of the 5,000 RCs in the city. As in the case of Shanghai, they would be elected for a period of three to four years. From the beginning of the year experimentation had taken place in the RCs in Beijing, another 20 cities were also engaged in such a experimentation (Saich 2001:177).

⁸ Pudong New District in Shanghai is a gateway leading into China’s market and a bridge connecting China and the world, and is one the most dynamic areas in Shanghai’s social and economical developments during the last decade. With its booming local economy, the government of Pudong over the last decades has put a high priority on a comprehensive construction of social infrastructure, focusing on basic-level social development and developing local democracy.

⁹ Derived from the PD Scheme, “Sub-scheme of Experimental Reform of Resident Committee” was thereafter formulated by Weifang SO, which further explains the functions of new RC as “planning, deliberating, decision making, coordinating, supervising, facilitating, communicating and organizing”.

Table 1 Pudong's RC Reform Scheme and The Organizational Law of Urban Resident Committee Compared

The role and responsibility of RC prescribed by the National Organizational Law

1. To publicize the Constitution, laws, statutes and state policies; to uphold the lawful rights of residents; to teach residents to fulfill their lawful obligations and protect public property; to carry out many forms of activities in promoting socialist spiritual civilization;
2. to manage public affairs and projects of public benefit for residents of the neighborhood;
3. to mediate civil disputes;
4. to assist in maintaining social order;
5. to assist the People's Government and its agencies in conducting work pertaining to residents' interests in public sanitation, birth control, welfare, youth education, and so forth;
6. to express residents' opinions, requests and suggestions to the People's Government and its agencies.

The role and responsibility of RC specified in Pudong's RC election program

1. To publicize the Constitution, laws, statutes and state policies; to uphold the lawful rights of residents; to teach residents to fulfill their lawful obligations and protect public property; to carry out many forms of activities in promoting socialist spiritual civilization;
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4. to assist in maintaining social order;
5. to assist the People's Government and its agencies in conducting work pertaining to residents' interests in public sanitation, birth control, welfare, youth education, and so forth;
6. to organize and report to annual resident representative assembly;
7. to adopt mutual help between RC and other community organizations;
8. to evaluate social workers' performance and raise suggestions to them;
9. to keep regular contacts with residents, strengthen social investigation, and collect basic information of both the neighborhood and the residents;
10. to mobilize community-based resources to serve the residents;
11. to express residents' opinions, requests and suggestions to the People's Government and its agencies.

Source: Adopted from the Organizational Law (1990) and Pudong Bureau of Social Development (2000)

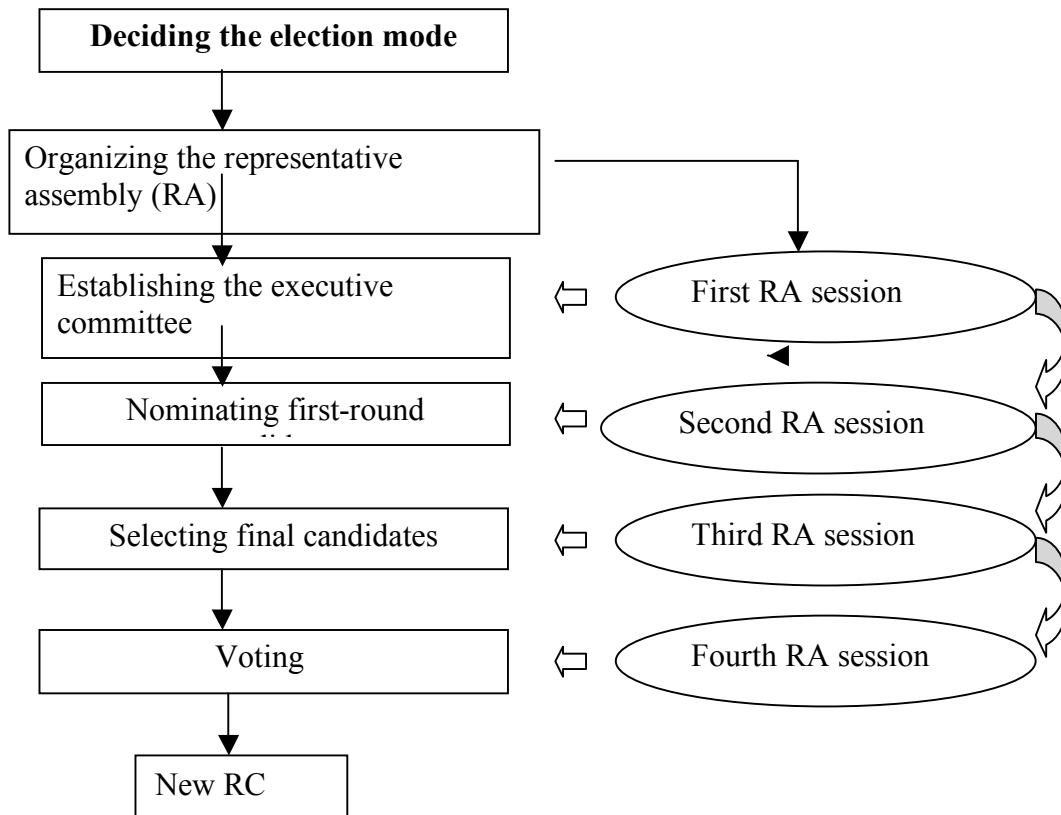
The Flow of RC Election

The 1999 Yuanzhu RC election was scheduled in five stages from May to July. Figure 3 describes the flow of election. To identify a consensus, a survey on the options of election mode was conducted by the existing RC in the neighborhood. According to the majority of the respondents, it was decided to adopt the mode of housing block based “indirect election”. It is “indirect” in the sense that the new RC members will be elected by housing block based resident representatives rather than by household or individual based constituents.

In such an election mode, organizing a “resident representative assembly” becomes a ground laying work. According to the prescribed election program, those residents who are not living in the neighborhood, under 18 and are deprived of political right should not be qualified as a resident representative. And, one representative candidate can be nominated by 8 to 10 households, and one housing block can also nominate no more than 2 candidates. From May to early June 1999, a 148 member representative assembly was formally organized as an electoral base for new RC. Among them, up to 80% were retirees. The average age was 58.7 with 30 of them below 50. More than 27% of the representatives had higher school or graduate level of education (Lin and Ma 2000: 54-55).

Overall, the Yuanzhu RC election underwent four sessions of representative assembly meetings to establish executive committee, nominate and select candidates and cast vote for RC members (see figure 3). The whole voting process was supervised by executive committee and also officials from Weifang SO to ensure the fairness of the voting procedure.

Figure 3 The Flow of RC Election in Yuanzhu, 1999

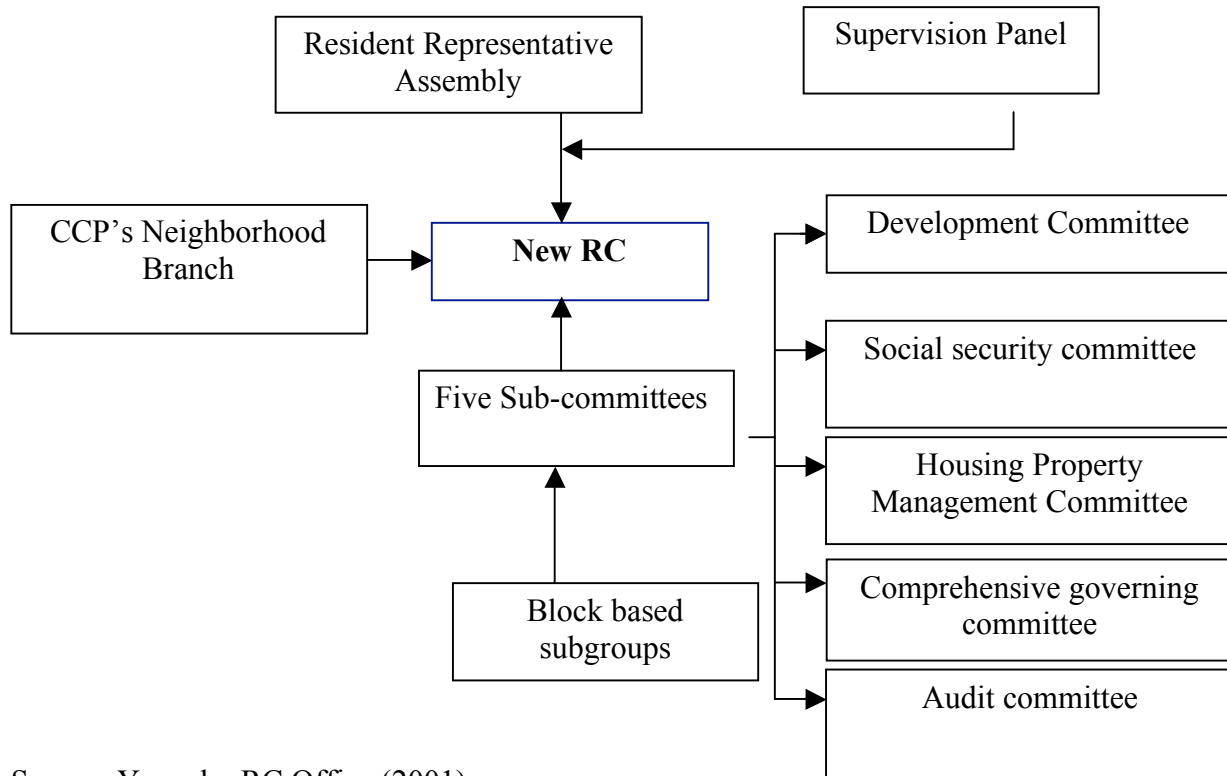


Source: Adopted from Yuanzhu RC Office (1999)

The Shape of Neighborhood Council

Figure 4 shows the shape of election-based new RC system in Yuanzhu. There are four interrelated building blocks of this system: Resident Representative Assembly, the elected RC and its sub-committees, RC’s supervision panel, the CCP cell branch, and resident’s sub-groups.

Figure 4 The Election-based Resident Committee System in Yuanzhu



Source: Yuanzhu RC Office (2001)

Resident Representative Assembly

As the legitimacy source of new RC power, the resident representative assembly is one of the most important components of the governing system. The assembly, as stated both in the Organizational Law and in the PD scheme, should be held at least twice in one year. It should be composed of all the legible local residents who are over 18, or by the representatives recommended from the resident sub-groups. The assembly, once established, has three basic aspects of functions including making decisions over issues that are related to the collective interest of the residents, deliberating the work report of RC, and electing and changing RC members.

Supervision Panel

A new organ of “supervision panel” was further established as a more or less independent ingredient of the new RC. This panel was composed of seven residents recommended by the

elected RC members and resident representatives, and worked independently from the five sub-committees. The panel had the power to supervise the routine work of RC members.

The New RC and Sub-committees

The RC is the actual core of the new governing framework. In the first meeting in November 1999 after the election, “five sub-committees” were proposed to be established in response to the growing complexity of neighborhood governing issues. The five internal sub-committees constituted the actual agencies in administering the neighborhood public affairs. What makes it different compared with former loosely organized sub-committees is that every sub-committee in the new framework was composed of cross-sector actors including RC members, social workers, resident representatives and governmental officials if necessary. For example, the “housing property management committee” included the manager of the housing property management company and a representative from the SO level hospital as its coordinator/partner.

The Party Cell Organization

The Yuanzhu RC election in 1999 also turned out to be an opportunity for the ruling CCP to restructure its social basis. The RC election voting turnout showed that amount to 71.4 percentages of the newly elected RC members are CCP members. They were organized into the CCP’s neighborhood branch and can influence the operating of RC through raising and framing import agendas in the resident assembly and sub-committee meetings.

Resident Sub-groups

Under the elected RC are various resident sub-groups, or “mass organization” [*qunzhong zuzhi*]. In Yuanzhu, many of these groups had been developed before election. The number of these groups grew considerably after RC election. In 2002, there were more than 70 resident groups that had been integrated into the elected RC framework.

The Patterns of Community Engagement

How do local residents and other neighborhood-based actors respond to this new shape of RC system? Especially how do they perceive the new RC and interact with it? Turning to the post-election workings of Yuanzhu RC, we find that neighborhood activism in the forms of residents' local engagement and sub-group formations has been greatly facilitated by the innovated institutional arrangement.

In 2001, a survey was conducted by Yuanzhu RC on a sample of 150 residents to explore their attitudes towards the newly elected RC. Table 2 presents the results from a simple question assessing approval or disapproval of the respondents on the new RC. Slightly over 21% of the respondents thought the elected RC as the actual administrative apparatus of the SO rather than the "self-governing" organization. More than 42% of them believed RC "actually as mass self-governing organization, not as administrative apparatus of the SO". Almost half of the respondents thought RC as both the mass self-governing organization and as administrative apparatus of the SO. From the perspective of SO officials, this signifies a big positive change in the community compared with traditional RC-resident relationship in Yuanzhu, in which many, if not most residents showed apathy towards RC staffs.

Table 2 Resident's Perception on the Nature of New Yuanzhu RC

Option	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents (%)
As mass self-governing organization in name, actually as administrative apparatus of the government	32	21.3
Actually as mass self-governing organization, not as administrative apparatus of the government	64	42.6
Both as mass self-governing organization and as administrative apparatus of the government	58	36.1

Source: Yuanzhu Neighborhood Office (2001).

Turning to the manner of interaction between RC and residents, residents who participated in the new RC system were more active in speaking up in the group meetings held

by the RC. The following statement made by Mr. Li, a local resident in Yuanzhu represents an evolving image of RC in the mind of ordinary residents:

For a long time, RC was in my mind only but an extension of the government. What they have done is to obey the orders from above. I have no doubt that SO serves our interests to a great extent, but we sometimes need to solve our actual problems by ourselves. We need to make decisions based on our own interests. RC election brings encouraging changes on RC's roles. The elected RC members are familiar with us; at least they tend to build familiarity with us. They are more energetic and more responsible to facilitate the solutions of various neighborhood problems (Yuanzhu interview, August 2003).

Table 3 shows the types of residents' engagement with Yuanzhu RC. The information collected was by no means complete, but it might be helpful to show that residents were more likely to engage in the activities that were organized by RC. Furthermore, among the listed activities, people were willing to participate in those issues related to their neighborhood interests especially about crime prevention and neighbor conflict mediation. Respectively 43.3% and 46.1% of the respondent engaged often or sometimes in the activities of community patrols and intermediating neighbors' interests.

Table 3 RC-mobilized Engagement in Yuanzhu, 2002

Type of activities	Frequency of participation (percentage of respondents)			
	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never/no
Holding a neighborhood post	12.1	10.5	37.3	40.1
Participate in RC patrols	20.5	22.8	43.5	14.2
Participate in RC administrative tasks	8.9	13.9	25.8	42.4
Participate in neighbor's conflict resolution	19.3	26.8	50.2	3.7

Source: Adopted from the result of a survey conduct by Yuanzhu RC on the participation in RC related functions" (n=55), in Yuanzhu RC General Office (2002).

In post election Yuanzhu, community engagement in the neighborhood political process was remarkably enhanced within the new RC framework. Apart from sitting in the quarterly resident representative meeting, residents of Yuanzhu can attend the monthly sub-committee meetings. To resident representatives and the elected RC members, the monthly meeting organized by sub-committee provides one of the most useful channels through which indigenous problems raised by the resident can be articulated and governed. For example, on 16 August 2000, a monthly housing management coordination meeting was held by the housing property management sub-committee. Both the manager of the “Shexi Housing Management Company” and officials from Weifang SO attended the meeting. RC members took this opportunity to raise “ten big concerns” including “insufficient lighting in stairs area”, “the lack of greenbelt” and “regulating floating population” in the neighborhood which were hot concerns of the residents. RC got positive responses from both the housing management company and the SO officials. At the same meeting, a schedule was established to solve these problems and the RC was invited to supervise the work of housing management afterwards. Mr. Wu, a representative from the Shexi Housing Management Company praised RC’s roles in coordinating housing service management:

Housing property management can be very sensitive because residents are in their own rights and pay for service by themselves rather than by government or *danwei* as before. Some homeowners are too critical on our management and often we get unreasonable complaints. We trust RC because it has a lot of connections with the residents. And most important of all, they are increasingly trusted by many residents. Thus it is better to be organized by RC to sit down and find a solution over housing managing problems (Yuanzhu interview, August 2003).

Such a case of RC-led local problem solving is never abnormal or extreme. In March 2001, twenty residents attend a RC sub-committee meeting to propose an outdoor gym area in the neighborhood. RC members responded this request with more than three sessions of consultations in the resident group meeting. After consulting on where and how to establish such a public sports area in the neighborhood, they submitted a report to the Weifang SO for financial support. Within two month, the construction of gym area was completed and opened for public use with applauses from many of the residents.

One further form of engagement in Yuanzhu fostered by the new RC system is the growing sub-groups formation. Table 4 shows the information on how various sub-groups work to organize the interest of the residents. Residents were encouraged to engage with these small groups under leadership of the new RC.

Table 4 Sub-groups Formation in Yuanzhu by 2002

Name	Number of participants	Time and Venue
“Silk hair” Newspaper Reading Group	25	Every Tuesday afternoon, Elder’s Centre in RC
Reader’s Club	30	Every Tuesday afternoon, Elder’s Centre in RC
Team of <i>Mulanquan</i> *	46	Every morning, Sports Centre in Yuansen Rd.
Team of <i>Shibafa</i>	23	Morning, Bamboo Garden, Yuanzhu neighborhood
Team of <i>Xianggong</i>	41	Bamboo Garden, Yuanzhu neighborhood
Team of Drum Playing	28	Every morning, Sports centre in Yuansen Rd.
Team of Fashion Show	8	Every Wednesday afternoon, Elder’s Centre in RC
Team of Fitness	52	Every morning, Sports Centre in Yuansen Rd.

Source: Yuanzhu RC Office (2003)

Note: *Mulanquan*, and *Shibafa* and *Xianggong* are all traditional Chinese *Qi Gong* believed by many local people as very useful means for health care.

The growing percentage of local residents engaged with each other through these sub-groups does signify a creeping new social life. This dynamics actually owes much to Mrs. Zhu, an elected deputy director of RC who insisted that all elected committee members should be supportive to resident groupings on their interests. In her words,

Promoting residents’ membership in these groups is a basic means to build RC’s familiarity with the local people. The committee members who are a part of the groups cannot only enjoy these activities, but also increase their contacts with the residents, learn their actual needs and information in more casual ways (Yuanzhu interview, Jan 2004).

The residents held cooperative and initiative attitudes towards the interest grouping promotions by elected RC members. Many of them appreciated the entrepreneurship spirit of Mrs. Zhu because she could facilitate the organization of these activities in their interests. Mrs. Yan, the leader of the team of *Mulanquan*, claimed that,

We learn from each other and practice *Mulanquan* in regular time and venue. At the very beginning our scale of participants was very small, and we did have a problem of venue booking and coordinating. The elected RC members show great help to us. They have more organizational capacity and can help to recruit more talent and committed members, coordinate the functions and help to book the venue. They even invite some professional instructors to give training course for us and help to arrange our team into public show (Yuanzhu interview, 2003 July).

The voice from Mrs. Zhu demonstrates the importance of an open and strong RC institution in the making of vibrant neighborhood politics. While most leisure time and interpersonal interaction among the residents were shaped by the *danwei* system before reform, an elected RC, by making it more responsible if not accountable, has emerged to be an institution setting through which societal engagement can be reproduced and sustained.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have demonstrated the evolving policy frameworks of Urban Community Building in Shanghai, and explored the creeping neighborhood activism engendered by them. Focusing on the interaction between RC and residents, we have found that the deepening community building strategies in Shanghai create organizational resources and open political spaces for the local residents who otherwise would have weak connections with each other. The pro-democracy neighborhood governing arrangements have in turn strengthened the legitimacy of the state's "nerve tip" organization by enhancing the residents' engagement with it. Overall, this case study reveals how an authoritarian regime can adapt to its locality through administrative decentralization and grassroots empowering.

Neighborhood space and territory-based organization continue to be vital for deepening democracy and strengthening civic capacity. They are unitary bodies able to express and articulate the felt needs of people and to capture power for the population at the grassroots level (Kaufman and Alfons et al 1997). In the Chinese urban society, neighborhood level political

structure and process can never be underestimated. In the paradigm of totalitarianism, students of Chinese politics in Mao's age tend to see a pattern of community organizations in social control and administering the harsh political order that gripped the cities (Schurmann, 1968; Vogel 1971; White 1971; Whyte and Parish 1984; Walder 1986; Henderson and Cohen 1984; Lieberthal 1989; Lewis 1971; Sidel 1974). In the evolution of Post-reform China, the dynamics of decentralization and deregulation have created more physical and social space for urban residents and local groups to seek personal autonomy and satisfaction more openly than several decades before. As Tony Said have remarked, neighborhood in which grassroots participation is practiced, would gain greater stake in the Chinese politics "with the expansion of the non-state sector of the economy and the work-unit providing less in terms of housing and social welfare benefits," and "with individuals taking increasing responsibility for these" (Saich 2001: 176). It remains an interesting question on the extent that the Chinese neighborhood becomes a building block of social capital or civil society as heralded by general democracy theories.

Exploring emerging forms of neighborhood activism is a research agenda along this line. Recent thrusts of neighborhood politics in urban China, notably Benjamin Read (2003)'s study of homeowner self-organization, Pan (2002) and Zhu (1999; 2002; 2004)'s anthropography of neighborhood gentrification and resident movement in Shanghai have provided very important findings about the emerging new forms of state-resident relationship.¹⁰ Arguably, as this paper indicates, more sufficient attention should be paid on the sophisticated role of state-side reforms in the making of nascent grassroots democracy. State initiative matters precisely because it structures the institutional space and creates necessary resources for local residents to expand their civic life in the authoritarian context.

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¹⁰ For more discussions in this regards, see Choate (1998), Read (1999), Brnewick, Tong and Howell (2004) and Derleth and Koldyk (2004)

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