Beijing's Urban Residents' Committees As a Case of Grassroots Administrative Engagement: Using Quantitative Data to Augment Qualitative Findings

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I. INTRODUCTION[1]

The residential neighborhoods of urban China display great variety. Within a single metropolitan area one can stroll through narrow lanes winding among pre-revolutionary houses or courtyard dwellings; past rows of brick or concrete socialist housing blocks; or alongside newly erected developments built around high-rise apartment towers. These varied locales have one thing in common: with few exceptions they all have an office containing a group of individuals who are paid by the state to serve as its designated liaisons within the neighborhood. The members of this organization, called a Residents' Committee [RC; *jumin weiyuanhui*], act as the grass-roots contacts and informants of the police and the government, carrying out a number of administrative tasks, from monitoring family-planning compliance to maintaining the household-registry rolls. At the same time, they also provide a range of services to their constituents, listen to and act on their suggestions and complaints, and organize social and civic activities for them to take part in if they choose.[2]

Inherently puzzling, the RCs confound a number of social-science categories. Hired by the state yet part of the community in which they serve, the RC staff occupy an unfamiliar type of intermediary position between state and society. They are not accountable to their neighborhoods through anything like a genuine electoral mechanism, yet they often are keen to build an image of responsiveness and legitimacy. They combine service functions with routine monitoring and complicity in occasional episodes of repression; their work involves a mixture of gentleness and

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[2] There exist relatively few detailed English-language studies of the RCs, but important exceptions include Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Allen C. Choate, "Local Governance in China, Part II: An Assessment of Urban Residents Committees and Municipal Community Development," Asia Foundation Working Paper #10, November 1998. For a recent summary and full literature review, see Benjamin L. Read, "Revitalizing the State's Urban 'Nerve Tips'," *The China Quarterly* No. 163, September 2000, pp. 806-820. A recent Chinese-language contribution is Lei Jieqiong et al., *Zhuanxing zhong de chengshi jiceng shequ zuzhi* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2001).

domination. They are an extension of a powerful state, yet unlike such institutions as the work unit they possess few carrots and sticks with which to goad and prod their constituents into compliance on an everyday basis.

In this paper, I first establish a theoretical framework within which to consider the RCs, and explain why they are worthy of study. Then I explain the sources of information on which this research is based. The following section and the conclusion accomplish the main purpose of the paper, which is to lay out some basic ideas about how the RCs work and illustrate them with evidence from a survey project funded by the Mumford Center.

A theme throughout will be the usefulness of bringing both qualitative and quantitative information to bear on poorly understood local phenomenon like the RCs. Without intensive qualitative research, not only would we be prone to mis-interpret survey findings, but even designing a survey questionnaire in an appropriate way would be difficult. Qualitative study can provide at least partial insights on sensitive or subtle matters that surveys cannot easily probe. At the same time, survey research, though relatively crude, provides a way to test the impressions formed through observational studies. It gives us a sense of whether findings from one locality are idiosyncratic or apply more generally.

II. THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Why might Residents' Committees be of interest to us? What is the most fruitful theoretical framework within which to consider them? A full, or even merely adequate, review of potentially relevant concepts is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on data. But the analysis in this paper should demonstrate that a number of theoretical devices that are commonly employed in the study of China and communist systems generally are not particularly fruitful for understanding these organizations. Specifically:

- The RCs are not simply a vestigial holdover from the Communist Party's early years of mobilizing and subduing Chinese society. These are not the atrophying appendages of a "waning" state; rather, they are being adapted and rebuilt within the rapidly changing social and economic environment of China's cities.
- Contrary to their official designation as "autonomous, mass-type organizations," they are

not manifestations of civil society, as they lack the requisite autonomy from the state.

• At the same time, they do not conform to the standard "transmission belt" model of mass organizations in communist systems.

• Social networks are crucial to their functioning, but prevalent ways in which we interpret social networks don't fully apply to the RCs. For instance, they conform in only limited ways to the clientelist[3] theories that (properly) loom so large in our understanding of state-society relations in China, as elsewhere. Nor do these networks look quite like the kinds of egalitarian bonds commonly considered in research on social capital. Neither an overly "vertical" nor an excessively "horizontal" understanding of them is correct.

Instead, I argue that the RCs are best understood within a different context. This type of neighborhood institution is one instance of what I call *grass-roots administrative engagement*, in which states create, sponsor and manage networks of organizations at the most local of levels that facilitate governance and policing by building personal relationships with members of society. Variants of this kind of institution can be found under many types of political regimes and historical contexts. In today's world, some of the most elaborate and persistent can be found in the countries of East and Southeast Asia, including democracies as well as authoritarian systems. In Taiwan, for instance, city districts are divided into neighborhoods, known as *li*, each of which is directed by a *lizhang*, who is paid a monthly stipend by the state and is charged with handling official duties under the supervision of the district authorities. Once appointed by the formerly dominant Kuomintang party, the *lizhang* are now elected to four-year terms by their constituents. Since the 1970s, the government of Singapore has overseen similar grass-roots bodies in public housing units, called Residents' Committees just like China's neighborhood institutions and carrying out many similar functions.

Empirically speaking, it is not difficult to think of familiar phenomena that constitute partial or weak forms of grass-roots engagement by the state. Even in liberal democracies like the United States, governments strive to maintain certain kinds of links with constituents. Bureaucracies employ specialists to act as intermediaries with those who receive special

[3] I understand clientelism to mean particularistic relationships involving exchanges of material, instrumental, and symbolic resources between power-holding patrons and their dependent subordinates.

government support or supervision. For instance, social workers establish relationships with welfare recipients; parole officers try to get to know and understand the circumstances of the parolees in their charge. The concept of community policing represents an attempt to bring police officers into closer contact with the localities they serve, and initiatives like the Neighborhood Watch Program try to involve ordinary citizens in reporting suspicious activity to the state. Looking to the not-so-distant past, we see that there were once even more highly articulated ties between state actors, politicians, and citizens at large — for instance, in the networks of city government machines, ward committeemen, and precinct captains. The organizations considered in this paper, however, are substantially more institutionalized than Neighborhood Watch groups, more deeply embedded in local society than most community policing initiatives, and more functionally diffuse than welfare caseworkers.

This type of institution has received relatively little study within the social sciences. Grassroots engagement nonetheless deserves attention for two broad reasons. First, it provides an important mechanism through which governments strive to accomplish their goals. Networks of deeply rooted local organizations are useful to the state in a number of different ways. They help it acquire information about individual citizens, allowing it more precisely and effectively to apply policy and interventions from police or other agencies. They convey information about laws, policies, campaigns, and initiatives to individual constituents. They embed state action within personal, face-to-face relationships, and thus endeavor to make it perceived as legitimate. Finally, they get citizens themselves involved in state-supported tasks, for instance by coordinating the production of public goods or the resolution of collective action problems.

The outcomes that this contributes to can be unequivocally benign or deeply oppressive, and are commonly somewhere in between. For example, the role that local informants play in assisting the police aids in providing security for all their constituents, while also making it easier for states to exercise repression over deviants who are branded as threatening. Grassroots engagement can help keep authoritarian regimes in power just as it helps bolster public health and social welfare. Regardless of our normative feelings about the appropriateness of these undertakings, the results they contribute to matter.

Second, these grass-roots institutions provide a set of structured opportunities and

constraints that affect the way citizens express their interests, act to address problems and needs, and interact with others around them. They offer a channel — never the only channel, but one that is immediately at hand — through which individual citizens are encouraged to direct their inquiries, requests, and demands regarding local matters. As well, they invite constituents to contribute their own time and energy to activities that support administrative or policing work, and also organize activities, outings, festivals and get-togethers that shape the social structure and cohesiveness of the locality. Individual citizens may or may not find these channels and pursuits appealing. They may choose to take part, or they may ignore or resist them. Because constituents have such choices available to them, grassroots administrative engagement also shapes and sometimes limits what the state can do.

III. DATA SOURCES

My research draws upon several different types of data.

I spent the sixteen months from August 1999 to December 2001 carrying out research in Beijing. I gradually established ten neighborhood research cites around the city. With two exceptions, these sites were not arranged through official channels; I contacted them through "cold" visits or through informal personal contacts. I chose the sites with an eye toward geographic dispersal and getting a variety of housing types and populations. Four of them are inside what was once the city wall in old neighborhoods. The others are in post-revolutionary housing blocs, and in new housing developments. I made a total of 116 visits to these ten sites, with each visit lasting a day or part of a day.

In addition to my work in Beijing, I made short trips to six other cities (Qingdao, Shijiazhuang, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hengyang, and Benxi), in order to visit neighborhoods and learn how they vary from place to place. Finally, I had a series of private interviews with Beijing residents concerning their participation in neighborhood organizations, and also was given access to a set of interview transcripts from Chinese researchers working on related matters.

Through the support of the Mumford Center, I augmented this qualitative work by participating in an original survey, the Beijing Law and Community Survey (BLCS). Ethan Michelson of the University of Chicago was the principal investigator, and Prof. Li Lulu of

People's University was our primary collaborator. This project received its major funding from the Ford Foundation and was part of a larger initiative on legal sociology based at People's University in Beijing.

The survey was carried out in the summer of 2001. A total of 1,394 survey questionnaires were collected. Through follow-up interviews and analysis of the data, our quality-control checks discovered evidence of fabricated data from six interviewers. We discarded all 270 questionnaires submitted by these interviewers, and the remaining data set represents 1,124 individuals in 26 neighborhoods in 7 urban districts of Beijing. Omitting 54 respondents who themselves work in RCs leaves 1,070 RC constituents in our sample.

IV: BEIJING'S RESIDENTS' COMMITTEES

As mentioned in section I, the RCs form an immense network covering almost all neighborhoods of China's cities, with the exception of some newly built housing developments and recently urbanized areas. The characteristics of specific neighborhoods and RC staff members vary from place to place, of course, but their general features follow a single basic template, which I will sketch out as follows. Table 1 shows the place of the RCs in the urban administrative hierarchy. Large Chinese cities have three levels of government: the city government, district governments, and Street Offices (sometimes called subdistricts or wards in English). The Street Offices directly organize and manage the Residents' Committees, which serve as their local contacts; the offices maintain a specialized staff to liaise with the RCs, and frequently call the RC members in to attend meetings and receive instructions. RCs come in two varieties: those in charge of ordinary neighborhoods and those that administer housing owned by a particular work unit. The latter type are called *jiaweihui* and they report to both the Street Office and the work unit, which may provide some of its staff and funding. Through this system, the state reaches deep into the fabric of neighborhood life.

Table 1: Levels of Administration in Beijing and Other Chinese Cities

Level	Chinese term	Number in Beijing	Number nationwide
City Government	*shi zhengfu*	1	663
District Government	*qu zhengfu*	(in city core) 8	749
Street Office	*jiedao banshichu*	105	5,904
Residents' Committee	*jumin weiyuanhui* (*jiashu weiyuanhui*)	3,885	114,815

(Sources: National figures: China Statistical Yearbook 2000; Beijing street offices: Beijing Statistical Yearbook 2001 [2000 data]; Beijing RCs: unpublished figures for the year 2000 from the Beijing city government, on file with the author. There are minor discrepancies between these internal data for RCs and those published in the Beijing yearbooks. Beijing figures do not include the outlying suburbs that are part of the greater Beijing administrative region.)

Ever since its founding, the communist state has carried out administrative tasks and exercised political control in urban areas largely through the workplace or "work unit" (*danwei*), and much scholarly attention has focused on this institution.[4] Nonetheless, city governments have always maintained the Residents' Committees as their alley-level, grass-roots liaisons, and their importance to the state has arguably increased over time, at least in certain respects. Even at its peak, the state-owned workplace only incorporated a portion of the urban population, and in recent years this portion has shrunk as state firms lay off workers and migrants stream in from the countryside. The challenges posed by these developments led urban governments to devote increasing attention and resources to the RCs over the course of the past 15 years. Extolled at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party and coordinated by the national Ministry of Civil Affairs, this effort proceeds under the banner of "community building" [*shequ jianshe*].

Table 2 provides some basic figures on Beijing's RCs, broken down by district. The top four districts in the table lie in the heart of Beijing and are surrounded by the latter four, which are considered suburban districts (*jinjiao*). The table captures a fact of Beijing's socio-economic geography: the four inner districts have a relatively large stock of older neighborhoods and thus have fewer work unit-run RCs. In contrast, the large number of factories and government offices

[4] For a recent overview, see Elizabeth J. Perry and Lü Xiaobo, eds., *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

built together with employee housing after 1949 results in a higher percentage of *jiaweihui* on the city's periphery. The inner-city RCs are somewhat larger in scale as well. The scale of the RCs is in flux, however, as Beijing and other cities consolidate and merge them while experimenting with other administrative modifications. Beijing's RCs average around 1,700 constituents each. Though these figures no doubt understate the actual population, as they do not include temporary residents, they indicate that, generally speaking, the area under an RC's jurisdiction is still small enough that its staff can be personally familiar with a substantial proportion of the residents.

Table 2: Basic Figures on Beijing's Street Offices and RCs, by District

Name of Beijing district	Permanent, non-agric. population	Number of street offices	Number of RCs	Percent of RCs that are *jiaweihui*	Population per street office	Population per RC
Dongcheng	626,000	10	285	17.2%	62,600	2,196
Xicheng	781,000	10	298	4.7%	78,100	2,621
Chongwen	413,000	7	168	10.7%	59,000	2,458
Xuanwu	562,000	8	242	21.5%	70,250	2,322
Chaoyang	1,522,000	22	1,030	39.6%	69,182	1,478
Haidian	1,616,000	22	1,024	63.9%	73,455	1,578
Fengtai	822,000	16	633	44.7%	51,375	1,299
Shijingshan	332,000	10	205	49.3%	33,200	1,620
Total	6,674,000	105	3,885	40.6%	63,562	1,718

(Source: Population, street offices: Beijing Statistical Yearbook 2001 [2000 data]; RCs: unpublished figures for the year 2000 from the Beijing city government, on file with the author. There are minor discrepancies between these internal data for RCs and those published in the Beijing yearbooks.)

Though according to law and rhetoric the RC members are to be elected by their neighborhood constituents, in fact they are still essentially hand-picked by the Street Offices. In the large majority of cases, elections follow a pre-rehearsed script in which votes are cast only by a group of perhaps 30 to 50 "residents' representatives" who are chosen for electoral duty by the Street Office and the Residents' Committee themselves on the basis of their supportiveness. Generally there are no more candidates than there are positions to be filled, although sometimes there is a measure of competition for one or two of the RC positions. It should be noted, however, that a few cities and districts are starting to experiment with at least somewhat more democratic electoral processes.

Table 3: 2000 Beijing Elections for RCs in 2000: Type of Voting, by District

Name of Beijing district	***Quanmin***: All residents may vote	***Hu daibiao***: One vote per household	***Jumin daibiao***: Voting by "residents' representatives"	**No election**
Dongcheng	0	0	285	0
Xicheng	0	0	298	0
Chongwen	0	0	162	6
Xuanwu	0	0	232	10
Chaoyang	4	6	938	82
Haidian	0	5	862	157
Fengtai	1	8	614	10
Shijingshan	1	0	136	68
Total	6	19	3,527	333
Percent	0.2%	0.5%	90.8%	8.6%

(Source: Unpublished figures from the Beijing city government, on file with the author.)

Table 4: Beijing Elections for RCs in 2000: Degree of Competition, by District

Name of Beijing district	***Cha'e* elections**: At least one more candidate than RC positions	***Deng'e* elections**: Same number of candidates and RC positions
Dongcheng	25	260
Xicheng	18	280
Chongwen	6	156
Xuanwu	26	206
Chaoyang	68	880
Haidian	20	847
Fengtai	14	609
Shijingshan	2	135
Total	179	3,373
Percent of all elections	5.0%	95.0%

(Source: Unpublished figures from the Beijing city government, on file with the author.)

Moreover, the state-led revitalization of the RCs has made the positions more remunerative and made the hiring process increasingly competitive. Once staffed largely by homemakers who were paid little or nothing, the committees now employ middle-school and high-school graduates who often have substantial organizational experience from previous jobs. Typically these are people who have been laid off or taken early retirement from ailing state-sector enterprises. Though RC workers are still not considered part of the municipal bureaucracy, nor do they have the type of professional identity one would associated with trained social workers, their compensation has risen significantly in cities throughout China. Stipends of 300-500 *yuan* per month are common in Beijing and other large cities, and some better-educated staff

recruited under special programs make more than 1,000 *yuan* — hardly enough to get rich on, but among low-skilled middle-aged urbanites in China's unemployment-stricken economy, this represents a stable income that is better than many have.

Table 5 illustrates that RC staff are, now as always, far more likely to be men than women. The average RC employee in Beijing is a woman with a high school or vocational high school education — though, as the table indicates, significant numbers of people with college or vocational college degrees now serve in RCs. Unlike the stereotypical bound-footed old lady of yesteryear, the average staff member is in her mid to late 40s. Nearly 40 percent of RC staff are members of the Communist Party. This reflects diligent efforts by the authorities to maintain the Party committees that are associated with each RC, and to ensure that at least one of the leaders of each RC is a Party member.

Table 5: Beijing RC Staff in 2000, by District

Name of Beijing district	Total number of staff	Average staff per RC	Average age	Percent female	Percent who are CCP members	Percent with post-secondary education
Dongcheng	1,526	5.4	48.0	91.5%	34.0%	14.5%
Xicheng	1,728	5.8	47.0	88.1%	39.7%	19.6%
Chongwen	973	5.8	46.9	90.9%	32.8%	12.1%
Xuanwu	1,374	5.7	46.1	88.7%	43.0%	16.6%
Chaoyang	4,123	4.0	46.5	73.8%	42.9%	20.7%
Haidian	3,589	3.5	47.8	76.6%	41.5%	23.5%
Fengtai	2,622	4.1	46.3	83.6%	37.3%	15.2%
Shijingshan	816	4.0	46.7	87.5%	39.0%	15.4%
Total	16,751	4.3		81.9%	39.8%	18.7%

(Source: Unpublished figures from the Beijing city government, on file with the author.)

The nature of the activities undertaken by the RCs has evolved over the course of a full half-century of their existence. RCs were established in the early 1950s, shortly after the Communists took control of the cities. They were part of the way the revolutionary leadership consolidated its grip on urban society and tried to transform it. The RCs helped the state to identify and monitor people who were considered threats to the revolution. In the Cultural Revolution, they even led rallies against people in the neighborhood who had been designated class enemies. They also helped the housing authorities ascertain whose homes were big enough that they should be shared with other households. In the late 1960s and 1970s, urban families

were required to send many of their children out into the countryside to learn from the peasants, and RCs had to ensure that they were not sneaking back to their parents' homes. To be sure, they also undertook a number of benign activities such as offering literacy classes, but nonetheless their more politicized and intrusive practices shaped popular perceptions of them throughout the Mao era.

As the Communist Party has carried out reform policies and sharply curtailed its ambitions for class transformation along socialist lines, the RCs have quietly realigned their position with respect to urban society. They still play an important role in policing and policy implementation, which is the biggest reason why city governments have labored to revitalize them. But as I will discuss below, these monitoring duties have become less antagonistic to most urbanites, while their role as providers of services and sponsors of social and civic activities have been greatly augmented.

The RCs facilitate a wide range of state policies and programs. The most prominent among them include:

- Assisting the police. In Beijing, officers from the local police substation are assigned to cover one or two RCs on an ongoing basis. They visit the committee office regularly to find out about or respond to crimes or offenders in the neighborhood. RC staff not only gather information on behalf of the police, but also accompany officers on visits to residents' homes. In sum, this represents a particularly elaborate and thorough form of community policing, one that is highly effective in allowing the regime to identify and respond to threats such as dissidents and (most recently) adherents of the banned spiritual sect Falun Gong, but that is more commonly directed toward conventional violations such as burglary, prostitution, and the like.
- Maintaining the system of household registry [*hukou*]. Controls on population mobility are not nearly as rigid as they were in the pre-reform era. City government and police nonetheless continue to maintain household registry rolls, which identify the residents at particular addresses, their ID numbers, and demographic characteristics. An important part of this are efforts to register and keep track of the large population of rural migrants.
- Helping to implement the one-child-per-family birth control policy. RCs maintain

records on women of childbearing age within the neighborhood, specifying such details as the method of birth control each uses. They carry out educational programs, but also report unauthorized pregnancies to officials at higher levels.

• Facilitating welfare programs. RC staff keep in touch with disadvantaged individuals such as those in certain categories of unemployment, those with disabilities, and elderly persons with no independent means of support. Based on their relatively detailed knowledge of residents' circumstances, the RCs help the state determine eligibility for state assistance.

Most of these state duties involve the gathering of the kind of "local knowledge" that bureaucrats in state offices far removed from the neighborhood would otherwise have no access to. It is important to understand the way that the RCs acquire this information. While in certain respects they are backed by the formidable coercive resources of the state, including the police, the system operates in such a way as to minimize the use of coercion or pressure and reserve it for exceptional circumstances. The RC in fact has relatively few favors and sanctions that it can apply in its dealings with constituents.[5] Unlike the work unit, the RC has no control over salaries or the distribution of housing. Residents can choose not to cooperate with it. In short, in order to carry out its duties efficiently and smoothly, RCs generally try to cultivate personal contact and familiarity with their constituents. In part, this is based on the staff's longstanding ties with their own neighborhoods, as most committee members are long-time residents of the neighborhoods they serve. But to understand the breadth and character of contact between RCs and their constituents, one also has to look at the many roles that the committee plays *other* than that of government informant and information-collector. These functions include:

• Listening to input from residents. The RC staff serve as sounding boards for all manner of complaints and suggestions from their constituents, usually over local matters: noise pollution, trash and waste disposal, and crime prevention are just some of the most frequent topics at issue. Sometimes the RC is willing and able to act on these requests or

[5] This is not equally true for all residents, of course. Those who depend on state welfare support, for instance, may require the RC's favor. Also, in a few cases within any typical community, migrants or long-term residents will need the RC's imprimatur (granted in exchange for rent or fees) in order to run a shop or other small business in the neighborhood.

demands, other times not, but the point is that residents often see them at least as a potential source of solutions. Committee staff also provide an ear for lonely residents who come to the RC office simply in search of someone to talk to.

• Mediating disputes between neighbors and within families. Usually at the request of one of the parties to the conflict, RCs intervene in squabbles between households over such matters as noise, shared utility bills, and the use of shared facilities like kitchens and courtyards.

• Providing a range of small goods and services, usually free of charge. For instance, the RCs in Beijing have all been equipped with blood pressure meters and they give free tests to anyone who wants one. They sometimes purchase commodities like dish detergent and sell them to residents at bulk rate. The committees also were used in recent years to distribute free water-conserving spigots to their constituents as part of a city resource-protection program.

• Leading charity collection drives. In response to what are usually government-organized campaigns, RCs encourage residents to contribute to causes like relief for victims of floods and earthquakes. They sometimes go door-to-door to solicit funds, or post notices requesting people to come to the committee office to donate.

• Coordinating collective action in response to local problems. Examples include efforts to clean up dirty hallways, or to have all residents apply roach poison simultaneously within a certain building so that the pests will not just flee into others' homes.

The Beijing Law and Community Survey provides some indicators of just how often Beijing residents approach the staff of their RC in connection with one of these functions. One section of the survey listed a series of reasons, gleaned from fieldwork, why people might visit their local committee office and asked the respondent whether he or she had ever done so for that reason. Table 6 displays the results. Particularly notable is the frequency with which respondents visited the RC for such mundane purposes as paying fees, taking care of documents, and receiving low-cost goods or services. Nearly a quarter of the sample also reported having visited the RC to express an opinion on issues of local concern, such as neighborhood security. Much smaller, but still considerable in absolute terms, are the numbers of people who have been to the RC regarding

a dispute of some sort. Field research suggests that all these kinds of interactions are important for bringing the RC into contact with as many constituents as possible, for recruiting potential activists, and for generating the sense that the RC is performing useful functions. Though these contacts are only casual and occasional, they contribute to the sense that the RC is looking out for people's interests or at least the interests of the public as a whole.

Table 6: Visiting RCs for Specific Reasons:

Have been to an RC office:	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
to pay or discuss fees (such as fees for trash, water, gas, heating, electricity, cable television)	279	26.07
to discuss welfare-related matters (such as Relief Cards, the minimum guaranteed income, all kinds of aid, etc.)	80	7.48
to take care of documents and permits, or to get something stamped	315	29.44
to discuss or give input on neighborhood issues	252	23.55
for free or low-cost services or goods	515	48.13
because of a dispute with a neighbor	64	5.98
because of a dispute within the family	26	2.43

(Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001)

But in addition to cultivating this relatively shallow, occasional interaction with many constituents, the RC also provides a welcoming venue for those residents who wish to participate in social and civic activities in a more active and sustained way.

One of the responsibilities assigned to the RC is to sponsor group undertakings. In the cases I observed in Beijing this was one of the criteria by which Street Offices would assess them in their yearly evaluations, and the committees were expected to keep documentary evidence including photos of the get-togethers held under their auspices. These took various forms. Some committees led choral groups, others dance classes. Quite prevalent are exercise groups practicing both the traditional *taiji* [taichi] and the newly popular *jianshenqiu*, a rubber ball attached to a bungee cord used to whack oneself therapeutically on the back in a series of

synchronized movements. One RC chair in a relatively affluent neighborhood organized her circle of middle-aged-and-older associates into a fashion show team, which would get together to show off their latest apparel. RCs would also lead outings to parks and other attractions, and some maintain activity centers where residents can read books or play low-stakes *majiang* [mah-jongg].

In addition to these recreational endeavors, the RCs organize the most receptive of residents to participate in various forms of service. These individuals, often designated as "small-group heads," "building heads," "courtyard heads," or the like, act as the committee's contact people within a portion of the RC's jurisdiction. Any given neighborhood may have 20 to 50 such people, generically termed "activists." They help the Residents' Committee with many aspects of its work, from disseminating announcements to keeping in contact with welfare cases. They bring disputes among their neighbors to the RC's attention as part of the mediation program. When the RC — and the police — need to find out something about a particular household, they often contact the activist who lives nearby. But activists don't just work on behalf of the RC; they may also do little chores like going door-to-door to collect fees for sanitation, gas, or electricity; help deliver mail or newspapers; or sweep the hallway floors. Some residents also choose to take a shift in the RC-sponsored security patrols, analogous to Neighborhood Watch groups, which can be seen keeping an eye on local comings and goings and proudly sporting their distinctive red arm-bands.

In a few of the Beijing neighborhoods that I studied, the security patrollers were given very small cash payments on a monthly basis in compensation for the hours of service they put in. Those partial exceptions aside, activists serve on a volunteer basis. Their motivation for taking part in this type of voluntary work seems to be the pleasures of sociability, a sense of empowerment, and the fulfillment from playing a valued part, however minor, in the ranks of the city's administrative apparatus. They also gain the opportunity to have a hand in discussing and addressing problems around the neighborhood. At times they may even have an impact on the selection of RC staff. As mentioned above, RC elections occasionally feature one or two more candidates than there are staff positions, and in this case the preferences of the activists are

decisive. Street Offices also may consider their views in the nomination process.[6]

Unsurprisingly, not every resident is equally disposed toward these types of social and voluntary pursuits. Simple descriptive figures such as those in Table 7 help illustrate a few basic patterns.

Table 7: Participation in RC-Sponsored Activities

Percent in category of respondent who:	**All respondents**	**Women**	**Retirees**	**Party Members**
Contributes regularly to RC charity drives	35.4%	36.9%	49.7%	37.5%
Participates in RC social events	10.7%	11.9%	18.7%	18.4%
Participates in RC patrols	6.8%	9.5%	17.5%	8.8%
Holds a neighborhood volunteer post	4.9%	7.0%	12.9%	5.7%
	Percent that are:			
Of those who do the following:		**Women**	**Retirees**	**Party Members**
Contribute regularly to RC charity drives		54.1%	45.6%	25.9%
Participate in RC social events		57.9%	57.0%	42.1%
Participate in RC patrols		72.6%	83.6%	31.5%
Hold a neighborhood volunteer post		75.0%	86.5%	28.8%

(Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001)

Relatively undemanding forms of participation, such as contributing occasionally to RC charity drives, are found among a wide swath of the population (more than 35 percent of our sample), and involve a variety of residents. Of those who reported contributing to RC charity drives, 54 percent were women and 26 percent were Party members, which is little different from the proportion of these groups in the overall sample (52 percent and 24 percent, respectively.)

More time-consuming or committed forms of participation tend to disproportionally attract women and retirees. For example, well over 70 percent of those who take part in security patrols and hold neighborhood volunteer posts are women, and well over 80 percent are retirees. This partly stems from the fact that retirees have more time on their hands for such activities, but fieldwork also suggests that these numbers also reflect the social affinity between the RC staff

[6] Activists influenced an election in one of the RCs that I visited personally, as well as elections I was told about by other researchers second-hand.

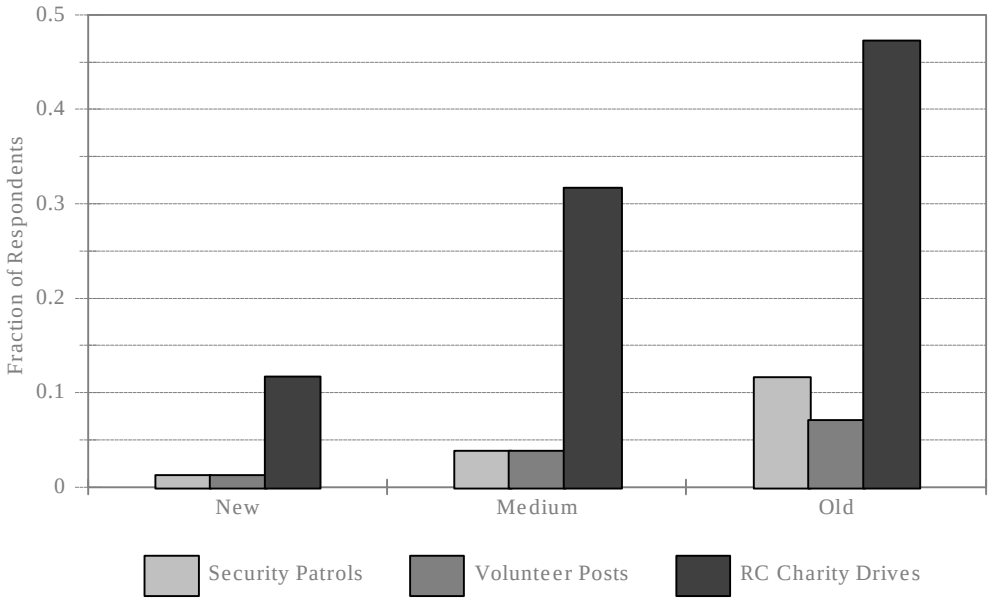
themselves and those who participate in the activities they sponsor. Assuming that our sample captured a representative slice of the population of Beijing, these figures further imply that the absolute numbers of people who contribute their time to programs generated by the Residents' Committee are quite substantial.

Neighborhoods are not all alike in terms of the amount of RC-related volunteer activity they generate, as Chart 1 suggests. As one would expect, in new neighborhoods where RCs are just being developed, there is relatively little such activity, while RCs are more active in this respect in older neighborhoods.[7] Given the massive extent of urban redevelopment in Beijing and other Chinese cities today, there is considerable uncertainty as to how RCs will function in newly built areas, particularly in privately owned developments where owners' organizations are beginning to be active.[8]

[7] Note that "age of neighborhood" is measured here by the average number of years lived there by respondents in that neighborhood — thus "new" neighborhoods could in fact be simply "high turnover" neighborhoods, though in fact they do appear to be newly built.

[8] See Benjamin L. Read, "Democratizing the Neighborhood? New Private Housing and Homeowner Self-Organization in Urban China," paper presented at the 97th annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 2001. This paper may be downloaded from http://pro.harvard.edu by searching for my name.

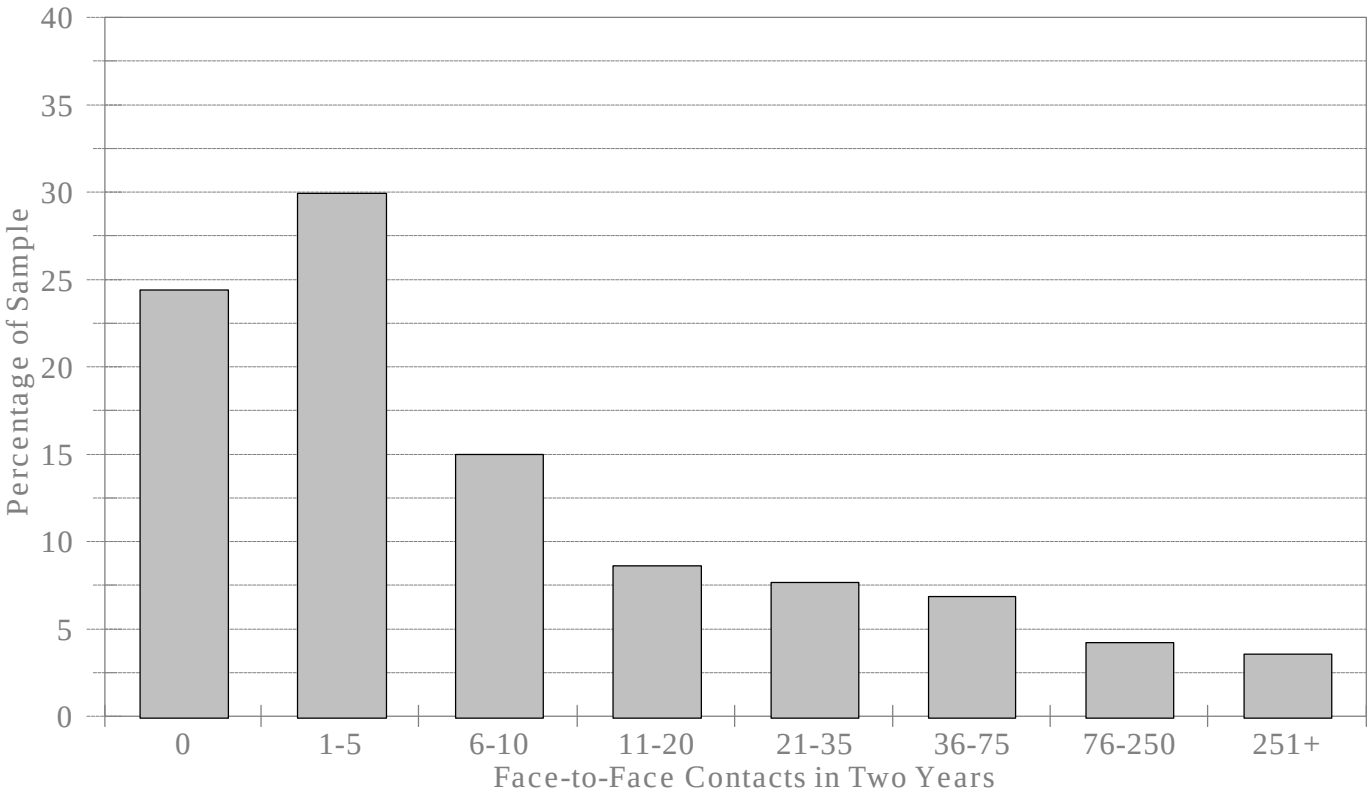
Chart 1: Participation in RC Activities: Fraction of Sample by Age of Neighborhood



(Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001)

The more casual forms of interaction that constituents have with their RCs, together with the various activities of a high-involved minority of residents, add up to a substantial amount of face-to-face contact between RCs and those they administer. Chart 2 shows that more than 75 percent of our Beijing sample reported some degree of contact with the RC in the past two years. To be sure, for many residents this is sporadic and infrequent. But more than 30 percent of our sample reported contact with an RC staff member at least every other month or so. The thick tail in the distribution below illustrates that a considerable minority of citizens has extremely frequent interaction with the RC. Though somewhat abstract, this chart gives a hint of the RC's position as an interface between state and society. Though quite a few citizens may not even know where their RC's office is located, generally speaking the RC is in close enough touch with enough of its constituents to have a good sense of the goings-on within its domain.

Chart 2: Frequency of Beijing Citizens' Contact with Their RC Staff



(Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001)

What do ordinary citizens think of the RCs? Interviews provided a way to explore people's perceptions in depth, but I will first present the relatively crude but systematic answers suggested by the survey.

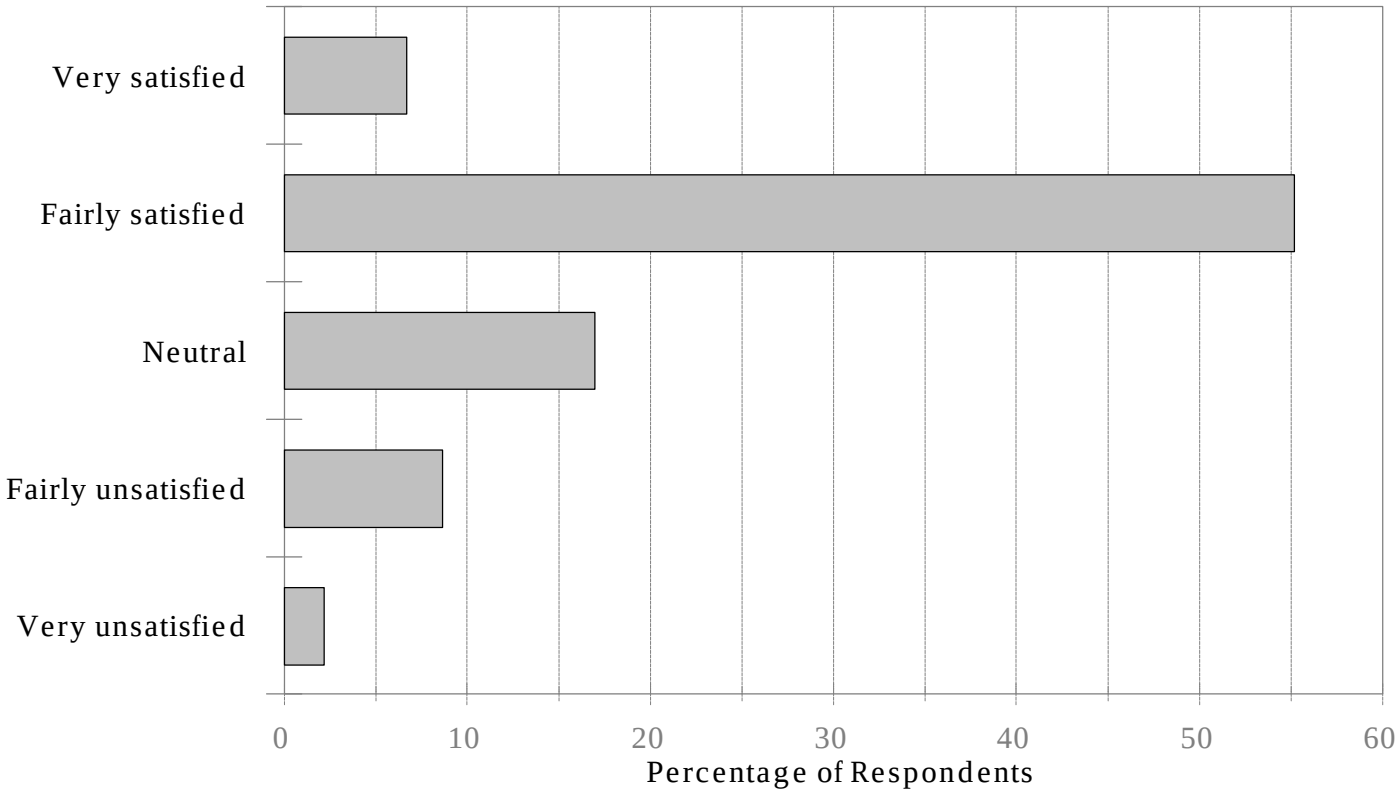
One question asked simply: "Overall, are you satisfied with the Residents' Committee in the neighborhood where you live?" More than 60 percent of respondents indicated some degree of satisfaction; another 16 percent were neutral (Chart 3). We certainly might wonder whether this is measuring marginal satisfaction given very low expectations, in other words, whether people are saying "given that we have to have these dreadful busybodies around, mine is not quite as awful as it might be." So we asked another question as well, designed to measure respondents'

perceptions of the RC's dispensability (Chart 4). It stated "suppose a place had no Residents' Committee" and asked, essentially, whether or not this would make the residents any worse off. Over 70 percent of respondents answered that not having an RC would entail either "big trouble" or "a certain amount of trouble" for residents — as opposed to "a small amount of trouble" or "no trouble." This suggests that Beijing residents tend to perceive it as a useful institution, at least on balance.

At the same time, as Chart 5 shows, this broad-based feeling that the RC is generally satisfactory and useful should not be taken as implying deep trust in this institution. Only about a quarter of our respondents selected one of two "trusting" answer categories in our question designed to measure how comfortable people are sharing personal information with their RC.

Chart 3: Respondents' Satisfaction with Residents' Committee

Question D13. "Overall, are you satisfied with the Residents' Committee in the neighborhood where you live? Are you ..."



(Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001)

Chart 4: Perceived Dispensability of Residents' Committee

Question D16. "Suppose a place had no Residents' Committee. Do you think that, for the residents, this would lead to ..."

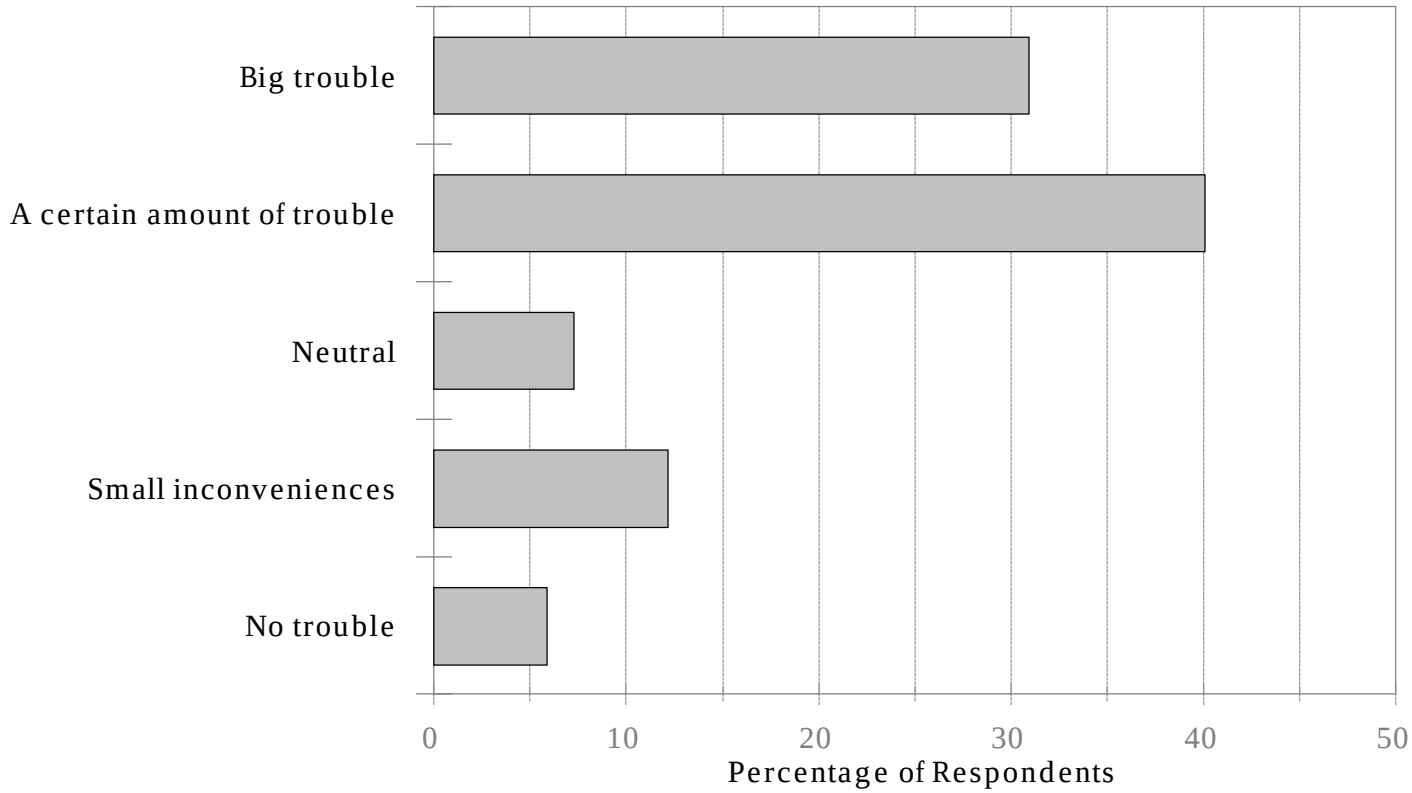
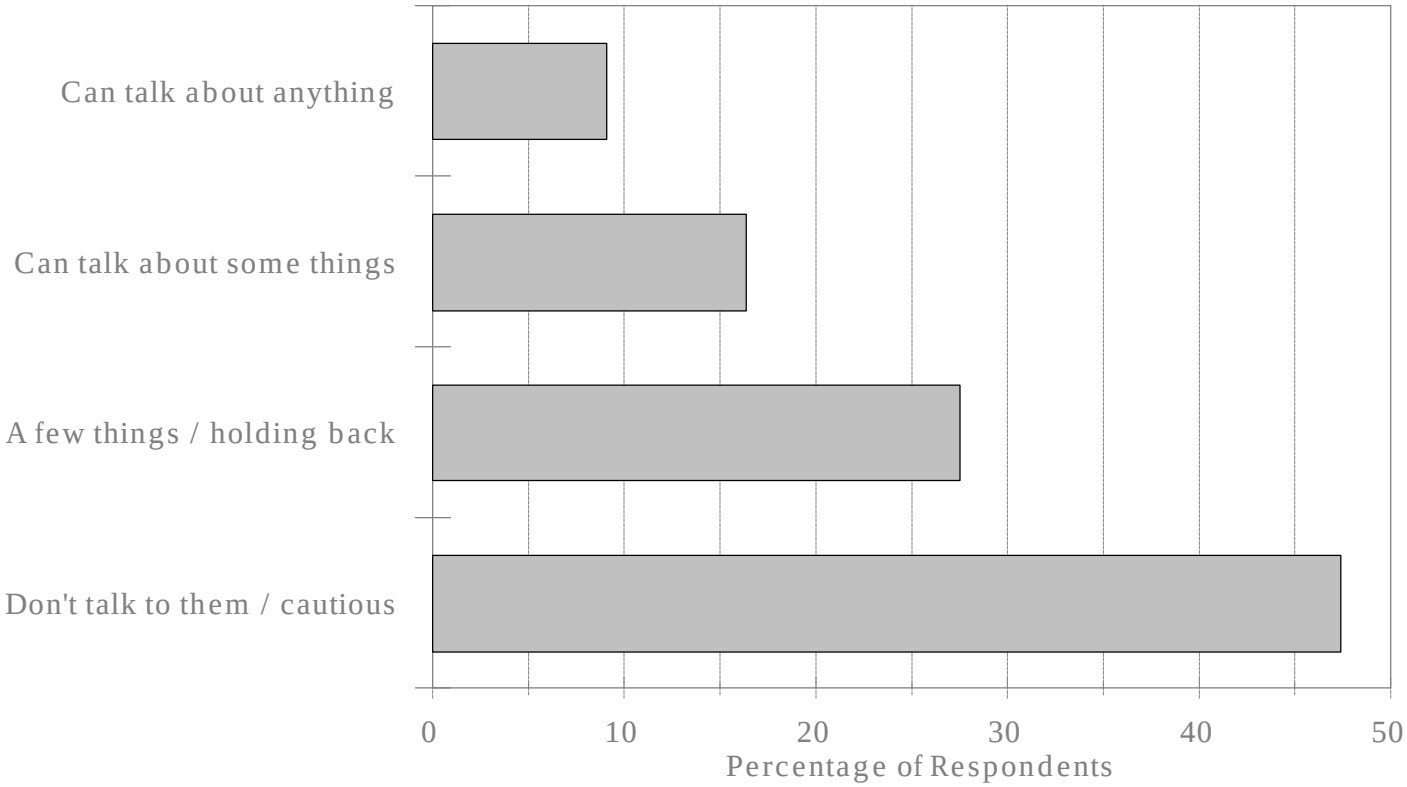


Chart 5: Degree of Thick Trust in Residents' Committee

Question D12: "In terms of your own relations with the Residents' Committee, do you feel that [you] ..."



Exact wording of answer categories:
1. You can talk about any kind of matter with them
2. You can talk about most kinds of matters with them, holding little back
3. You can talk about a few things with them, holding quite a bit back, or
4. You basically do not discuss things with them; you are fairly cautious with them?

Survey results, taken by themselves, would not be entirely convincing. We might wonder, for instance, whether respondents felt some kind of pressure to give positive answers (though the responses to the trust question imply that this was not the case.) Interviews conducted in private also uncovered widespread approval for RCs, albeit with great variation from person to person. Some interviewees complained that the RCs were of no help in solving problems that really mattered to them, like finding a job. Others were angry about specific decisions that RCs had

made. But many others looked favorably on their RCs, for a variety of reasons. Some liked knowing that the RC is keeping an eye on things while they're away at work. Others appreciated knowing that they can call someone when the sewer backs up. Some find it useful to contact the RC when they need to get certain kinds of documents officially certified. Apart from the factors mentioned above such as the recent increase in the committees' commitment to service-provision, another important factor underlying residents' attitudes seems to be fear of the burgeoning rural migrant population, whom urbanites tend to view with suspicion. As state controls on mobility have grown less rigid, there has in fact been an increasing demand by urban residents for supervision of this feared underclass.[9]

What I have presented in the above paragraphs is a compressed and stylized picture of the way the RC operates and interacts with ordinary city dwellers. This picture, needless to say, omits much detail, and only begins to get at the great differences in the ways individuals interact with and perceive these local institutions. Still, it should suffice to serve as the basis for a discussion of the broader implications of these groups.

V: CONCLUSIONS

I have presented the Chinese Residents' Committees as a case of a phenomenon I refer to as grassroots administrative engagement.

The RCs are fundamentally different from autonomous organizations of civil society. The state hires their members, pays them, and directly oversees them; it thus determines their basic purposes, shapes the tenor of their activities, and constrains them to a large degree. Well-functioning RCs balance this, however, by being as responsive to the requests of individual constituents as they can; by providing a variety of minor services; and by offering residents ways to join with their neighbors in recreational and public-spirited activities.

It should be noted that the state-managed nature of the RCs, while limiting them in certain respects, also bolsters their appeal as a locus for popular participation, in some obvious and some

[9] On the attitudes of city residents toward migrants, see Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

less obvious ways. The scale of government investment in these groups means that they are readily accessible in virtually every neighborhood. Their status as government liaisons and their links to higher levels of the bureaucracy make them a source for authoritative information or resolutions to local problems. And finally their official status increases (rather than decreases) their appeal to certain types of volunteers, for whom participation in RC activities provides a sense of taking part in an important civic project and a national mission.

Thus we find significant levels of voluntary involvement and participation in the RCs despite their heavily statist nature. This in itself is not an unprecedented finding within studies of communism, but it also casts these organizations in a light quite different from that of many prevailing interpretations. The specific circumstances of today's China, where the Communist Party has so thoroughly abandoned its goals of social transformation, make this all the more striking. Local activists participate in their neighborhoods as volunteers; the direct or indirect pressures to participate identified by previous generations of communism scholars are essentially absent, nor are there the kinds of substantial material rewards expected by clientelist theories. They participate in these "public" organizations even though there exist alternative ways to seek sociability and fulfillment within the private sphere through individual friendships, social networks, and even a tentative but growing crop of independent organizations.

If these unexpected results hold for the Chinese case, this suggests that other examples of grassroots engagement in relatively more open political systems such as those of Taiwan and Singapore should be all the more fertile ground for comparative study. For instance, in terms of accountability, I have found here that China's RCs strive to be responsive to constituents, but this applies to relatively marginal matters; the RCs generally do not serve as lobbyists for citizen interests over weighty issues like urban redevelopment plans. Taiwan, where *lizhang* are now directly elected by residents, offers an intriguing test of the question of whether and how state mandates coexist with electoral accountability in this type of organization. It also may offer clues as to how what began as institutions designed for social control may evolve into something different within the context of systemic democratic change — rather than merely withering away.

Similarly, to consider effects on society, we find in the Chinese case that the RCs act to promote social ties among constituents — yet in a selective way that is constrained and shaped by

the state. The RCs offer opportunities for residents to interact together and take part in collective undertakings, but it encourages certain types of people to take part more than others, specifically those who are supportive of the committee's work. The RC's *don't* employ in their repertoire of activities some practices that would seem to be obvious ways of developing solidarity: for instance, the RCs almost never hold open public meetings in which all residents could freely discuss neighborhood matters. Research on other cases of grassroots engagement will be able to determine whether this type of institution faces inherent limits on its capacity to promote community, or whether it in fact has substantially greater possibilities for doing so than the Chinese case suggests.

I have pointed out the important analytical distinction between grassroots engagement and civil society organizations. But it is also important to consider the implications of the fact that, from the perspective of individuals seeking ways to take part in group activities that are enjoyable and convey a sense of meaning, what organizations like the RCs provide have considerable overlap with what autonomous organizations might offer. In other words, it makes sense that these groups may, in effect, compete with civil society, acting as a dispersed set of sponges soaking up citizens' participatory energies. Why form your own exercise group when there is one already organized for you right outside your apartment building? This effect is presumably magnified in a setting like China, where civil society is embryonic and frail. Looking at cases like Taiwan, where civil society has blossomed in recent years, will allow us to consider whether state-fostered networks detract from independent associations or whether there might be positive feedback effects between the two.

Finally, we have seen that grassroots engagement plays an important role in governance and policy implementation; indeed, from the state's perspective this is its principal raison d'être. The RCs facilitate a particularly extensive set of governance functions. It should be clear from the discussion in section IV that the RCs rely for their effectiveness on the way they generate face-to-face relationships with constituents. These ties come about in a number of ways, including the existing social networks of persons who become RC staff members; the practices through which the RC encourages residents to come in contact with it; and the way they offer themselves as focal points for social and volunteer activities.

This builds on and generalizes the recent work on public-private "synergy" in development studies.[10] This literature usually looks at how states find ways to partner with local communities. The networks found in grassroots engagement build on these ideas in two respects. First, while some of the outcomes they contribute to are developmental, such as birth control and public health, they are designed to promote more general administrative and political projects as well, such as policing, welfare, migration control, and regime stability. Secondly, the nature of the links they forge between state and citizen are distinctive. These are not just ways in which bureaucracies form partnerships with localities to jointly accomplish an agreed-upon public goal. Here, states engage with societies in a sustained and pervasive fashion, forming dense networks reaching to a large proportion of the population at an individual level and involving some measure of personal familiarity. This engagement appears to shape both sides of the relationship in profound ways that deserve to be understood more fully.

[10] Peter Evans, "Government Action, Social Capital and Development: Reviewing the Evidence on Synergy," *World Development* 24:6 (June 1996), pp. 1119-1132. See also the other papers in that special edition of *World Development*, as well as Deepa Narayan, "Bonds and Bridges: Social Capital and Poverty," undated World Bank paper; Monica Das Gupta, Helene Grandvoinnet, and Mattia Romani, "State-Community Synergies in Development: Laying the Basis for Collective Action," undated World Bank paper; Mildred Warner, "Social Capital Construction and the Role of the Local State," *Rural Sociology* 64:3 (1999), pp. 373-393.