

Assessing Variation in Civil Society Organizations

China's Homeowner Associations in Comparative Perspective

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Theories of civil society set high expectations for grassroots associations, claiming that they school citizens in democracy and constrain powerful institutions. But *when* do real-life organizations actually live up to this billing? Homeowner organizations in the United States and elsewhere have sparked debate among political scientists, criticized by some as nonparticipatory and harmful to the overall polity and defended by others as benign manifestations of local self-governance. With this as a backdrop, China's emerging homeowner groups are used as a testing ground for exploring variation in three criteria of performance: self-organization, participation, and the exercising of power. Comparisons are drawn cross-nationally, among 23 cases in four Chinese cities and over time within neighborhoods. The article puts forward several factors affecting the properties of grassroots groups, highlighting the role of conflict, the political–legal environment, and collective action problems in shaping the way they engage their members and take political action.

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It was as close as you can come in China to an opposition political party running a slate of candidates for local office. In late December 2003, members of the Little Homeowners Team stood outside the shopping center in Lijiang Gardens, a sprawling suburban housing complex south of

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Guangzhou.¹ A poster presented the names and pictures of 14 residents who were running not for any government positions but for leadership of the development's homeowner committee. A banner called on passers-by to "defend the rights and interests of the homeowners, actively participate in the election." Team leaders distributed pamphlets, took donations, and sold logo-bearing caps. They hoped that their efforts would make them the neighborhood's first democratically elected representatives (interview, December 26 and 27, 2003).

Just down the road from Lijiang stood Guangdi Gardens, built several years after its neighbor, in the late 1990s. Astride its front entrance, flanked by palm trees, towered a 60-foot-high archway patterned on Paris's Arc de Triomphe. Inside lay rows of brick-paved streets, neatly trimmed hedges, and three-story homes. The stately opulence belied the chaos surrounding the management of this 2,000-unit community. The developer, having defrauded hundreds of home buyers in a scam involving multiple titles to the same pieces of property, had absconded. Residents of Guangdi had launched several protests against their predicament, attracting sympathetic media coverage, but they were internally split. One faction of owners favored mild petitioning of various government offices, another advocated further demonstrations, and a silent majority whose properties were not immediately affected by the fraud sat on the sidelines. With no cohesive organization, no clear leadership, and no obvious way forward, as one homeowner put it, "We're in a vacuum" (interview, December 26, 2003).

These two vignettes display the multifarious nature of China's urban homeowner groups, one of the most dynamic parts of the country's nascent civil society.² The more active of these organizations constitute a startling break from the practices of Communist Party-sponsored groups and afford residents significant space in which to meet, debate, take action at their own initiative, and manage their neighborhoods in a democratic fashion. Yet many others are stymied, inactive, or unrepresentative, whether because of repression or internal disarray.

The mixed and uneven condition of these organizations is mirrored in the ambiguous status accorded to such property-based groups in scholarly studies of associations. As discussed below, some political scientists excoriate homeowner organizations, whereas others rally to their defense. Political theorist Nancy Rosenblum (1998) thus characterizes these groups as "a veritable Rorschach test of associational life" (p. 116). Taking a close look at China's "owner committees," or *yewei hui* (YWH),³ provides an opportunity to explore the relationship between private property and civil society and to reconsider theoretical accounts of this relationship.

Most importantly, examining the contested domain of homeowner groups allows us to confront a general problem in the study of civil society organizations (CSOs): Too little is known about *when* they actually live up to the high expectations some theorists have for them, when they school citizens in democratic participation and empower them to speak up to institutions that would otherwise ignore their voices. Much scholarly attention has been directed toward defining the concept of civil society, building national scores and indices, and trying to specify whether it contributes to regime change (Alagappa, 2004; Anheier, 2004; Bermeo & Nord, 2000; Diamond, 1999; Heinrich, 2005; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004). The great majority of this work has focused on the macro level, looking at national aggregates and country-level outcomes. Even sophisticated analyses that use survey data to tease out the characteristics of specific types of organizations, such as churches, unions, or environmental groups, have been unable to explore variation *within* such broad categories (Stolle & Rochon, 1998; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pp. 369-390).

In contrast, empirical research ascertaining the civic properties of *specific groups* has lagged, even as theorists have noted the absurdity of treating civil society as an undifferentiated mass. Rosenblum's (1998) *Membership and Morals* eloquently explores the variability of people's experiences in actual organizations, insisting on the "indeterminate valence of associational life" (p. 8). In *Democracy and Association*, Mark E. Warren (2001) concurs that associations vary but rejects indeterminacy. Like others, Warren creates a typology of groups and predicts some categories to have better civic characteristics than others. Although worthwhile, this approach leaves obscure a great deal of variation within any given type. I argue that typologies should be complemented by study of the circumstances producing more or less civic behavior even within a single category of CSO.

In sorting out the various species of associational life, organizations based on private property emerge as a sharply contested category, one embodying paradoxical qualities. Property, by its very nature, divides haves and have-nots; it creates solidarities, but not on the basis of universals such as common citizenship. Nonetheless, it also constitutes a powerful spur to political action and has historically been seen by some theorists as a bulwark of freedom (Hayek, 1944; MacPherson, 1964; West, 2003). In China, where property rights are undergoing a conflict-ridden upheaval, this bears on the vexing question of whether economic reform will challenge the Communist Party's nearly 60-year monopoly on power. Some scholars, notably Thomas Gold (1990, 1998), have maintained that affluence and

ownership will lead to individuals combining within civil society to advance their interests. Others have questioned this, identifying instead new forms of individualized, clientelistic relationships with government officials (Wank, 1999) or corporatist intermediation (Unger, 1996).

Although there exist a few studies of homeowner groups in countries such as Mexico and Brazil (Caldeira, 2000; Low, 2003; Glasze, Webster, & Frantz, 2006), most work has been done on the United States, and it is against this backdrop that the study of China's YWH will be set. This raises the question of whether the two political contexts—one a well-established democracy, the other a single-party dictatorship, albeit one that has undergone far-reaching reforms—are so different as to preclude comparison of their grassroots organizations. This is, in fact, a question that urgently needs resolving in the civil society literature. The previously cited cross-national projects by Alagappa (2004), Anheier (2004), and Salamon and Sokolowski (2004) have each made persuasive arguments for studying associations within a common framework across political systems. After all, the concept of civil society emerged in the Western political tradition but has also been enthusiastically embraced in the other contexts, such as parts of Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Other scholars, however, highlight the close links between civil society and specifically democratic political systems, questioning the concept's applicability in authoritarian regimes (Howard, 2005). Michael Walzer (1995) perhaps puts it most strongly, "Only a democratic state can create a democratic civil society; only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state" (p. 170). I strongly affirm the possibility and importance of cross-regime comparison. This article emphasizes the opportunities for analysis, rather than the barriers to it, that different political contexts create. In comparing across substantially different settings, a well-defined, functionally specific form of association such as the homeowner group is especially appropriate because it holds constant many organizational characteristics.

This article first delineates the controversy surrounding homeowner organizations and shows why they constitute a useful laboratory for the study of associational life and politics. A set of three criteria is established for assessing CSOs more generally. These are then used to analyze the emerging homeowner groups in urban China, *cross-nationally* comparing them to their counterparts in the United States and also drawing comparisons *over time* within the same neighborhood and *among cases* by looking at groups in different circumstances.

Evidence is primarily drawn from fieldwork undertaken in China in 1999, 2000, 2003, and 2004. I conducted long interviews with homeowner

organizers in 23 neighborhoods in Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Guangzhou and in most instances was able to study the same case at more than one point in time. The difficulty of obtaining access to neighborhood leaders in China without a personal connection made a random sampling strategy impractical. Instead, cases were chosen with an eye toward obtaining a variety of organizational outcomes (see the table of cases in the appendix). Valuable information also came from interviews with municipal officials in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou; Chinese newspaper accounts; and conversations with several Chinese researchers.

Private Property, Interests, and Organizations

Do organizations based around the collective assertion of property rights make a positive contribution to civil society?⁴ The question presumes that we have yardsticks by which to judge the behavior of grassroots associations. But as noted above, studies of civil society have been geared toward delineating the boundaries of this vast sector and debating its macro-level effects rather than interrogating individual entities within it. Thus, it is necessary to refresh our acquaintance with the theoretical literature and translate it into operationalizable concepts.

A broad consensus holds among theorists of civil society as to the fundamental reasons why popular associations can be valuable to a polity. Ever since the 18th century, the concept has denoted autonomous organization, combinations free from the dictates of the crown, the clan, the corporation, or other centers of power. Such organizations elicit individuals' voluntary participation, drawing them out of solitary pursuits and into the realm of cooperation and deliberation. They enable these citizens to exert themselves in the public sphere, articulating preferences and demands to powerful institutions, thus pushing them to greater accountability (Diamond, 1999; Howard, 2003; Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004; D. H. Smith, 2000; Taylor, 1997; Warren, 2001).

Three core criteria by which to evaluate associations follow from the above. The first is the group's *degree of self-organization*. Autonomy from the state or other powerful actors is essential if organizations are to express their members' desires rather than twist or divert them. Although autonomy is never absolute, a key distinction separates an association whose purposes are decided by its own members from one that follows an imposed script. Authoritarian regimes such as China's feature many forms of association that are managed by the state. In democratic systems as well, groups may be

compromised by dependence on external actors, as when nonprofits become unable to turn away pressure from funding agencies (S. R. Smith & Lipsky, 1993). In concrete terms, positive indicators of a group's self-organization include determining its own goals, formulating its own bylaws and procedures for electing leaders, holding meetings when it pleases, and setting its own agenda for those meetings.

The second criterion is the *extent and quality of members' participation*. Groups are not mere black boxes, according to civil society theory. Their internal workings matter if they are to pull individuals out of a passive, "spectator" form of citizenship and allow them to "make many smaller decisions and shape to some degree the more distant determinations of state and economy," Walzer (1995, p. 164) writes. As observers going back to Alexis de Tocqueville have held, part of associations' value lies in the attitudes, habits, and abilities they may cultivate in their members. Ideally, in Warren's (2001) deft summary, these "developmental effects on individuals" include building a sense of efficacy, nurturing skills of speaking, negotiating and problem solving, and conveying political information (pp. 70-72). But for this to be possible, associations must engage their members' participation; leadership cannot be detached and autocratic. The implied specific criteria include the following: How frequent, open, and well attended are the organization's meetings? Is open deliberation on matters of common concern promoted? Is decision making transparent and subject to influence by all or opaque and limited to a small clique?

The third criterion concerns the group's *ability to exercise power*. A key idea behind civil society is that associations pluralize the broader sociopolitical world, balancing and restraining other concentrations of power. For this reason, inward-oriented organizations such as recreational or self-help groups are excluded from many definitions. As Diamond (1999) puts it, CSOs relate to the state without trying to dominate it; they "pursue from the state concessions, benefits, policy changes, institutional reforms, relief, redress, justice and accountability to their scrutiny" (p. 223). Organizations fulfill this criterion if they are capable of making demands on relevant external actors, whether those belong to the public or the private sector. Further indicators include being treated as a negotiating partner by the state or other power holders and achieving tangible results through the articulation of interests.

Political scientists and others studying homeowner organizations have assessed them with these values in mind. To take the three criteria in turn, critics of such groups in the United States (sometimes called residential community associations, or RCAs) call into question their self-organized

status. McKenzie (1994), for example, faults U.S. homeowner organizations as lifeless legal apparatuses imposed by developers—a “prefabricated framework for civil society in search of a population” (pp. 127, 145)—and difficult for occupants to change. He also questions whether they should be considered voluntary, as home buyers automatically join (p. 25). Others, such as Rosenblum (1998, pp. 127-129), take more seriously the idea that residents assent to the association’s rules by moving in. For such observers, the preexisting bylaws bolster rather than hinder the residents’ organizational capacity: “Unlike neighborhood groups, which depend on the chancey [*sic*] emergence of leaders, RCAs have built-in organization with their committees and boards of directors” (p. 151).

In terms of the quality and extent of members’ participation, the consensus among most observers of the U.S. case is that this is generally limited (Low, 2003, pp. 178-182; Rosenblum, 1998, p. 135). Dilger (1992) cites a California survey, finding that “thirty percent of the RCAs there could not obtain a quorum at their last general membership meeting” and that more than half of board members in a national survey called their associations “apathetic” (p. 140). McKenzie (1994) finds board elections often to be “a mere formality” (p. 133). He argues that this “pronounced tendency toward lack of involvement among the rank and file” (p. 142) leads to domination by a small “oligarchy” (p. 135) of enthusiasts, who are likely to be motivated by “the perceived pleasure of wielding power over others” (p. 131). Nelson (2005), however, cites a 1999 survey finding that 49% of homeowner association members said they attend “every meeting” or “most meetings” (p. 125). Others find the active participation of the board members to be a saving grace from the perspective of civic involvement, noting that such leaders sometimes go on to run for local public office (Dilger, 1992, pp. 134-135; Rosenblum, 1998, p. 135). But Warren (2001) sides with the critics, hypothesizing that homeowner groups have only “low” to “mixed” potential for developing political skills, critical skills, and civic virtues (pp. 142-162).⁵

As far as exerting political power, most agree that homeowner groups have the potential to make themselves heard. Dilger (1992) writes that they monitor local government and can assertively lobby it when their interests are threatened. “In some ways RCAs are like sleeping tigers. When left alone, they are of little concern to those around them, but once aroused from their sleep, they are clearly a force to be reckoned with at the local level” (pp. 130, 134). Most of the debate here revolves around the question of whether this should be welcomed or feared. Critics such as McKenzie (1994) and Daniel A. Bell (1998) say that homeowner groups encourage

people to withdraw from politics focused around publicly elected government and retreat into a hived-off, private world. Defenders see the same groups as contributing to local politics in a democratic and vigorous way that is wholly appropriate within a pluralist system (Stabile, 2000).

Almost none of these studies attempt to explain variation among individual organizations. Whether polemical or more circumspect in nature, these arguments tend to characterize them one way or another as a whole, Rosenblum's (1998) excepted. But the real theoretical value of these controversial organizations may precisely lie in their variegated nature. Homeowner organizations offer an important testing ground in which to assess these varied perspectives found both in China and in the general world of theory to explain when the aspirations of civil society theory are fulfilled and when they are disappointed.

The Emergence of Homeowner Associations in China

Exploring the civic properties of China's homeowner groups requires a grasp of the process through which they are coming into being. In the decades following the 1949 revolution, new urban housing was built and owned by branches of the state, including city governments and factories and other workplaces. A sea change began in the 1980s. Recognizing that massive new investment was needed, the state began to encourage the building and selling of homes on a commercial basis, even as governments remained heavily involved in these processes. With Hong Kong and its densely concentrated "estates" as the model, new homes were clustered in large condominium developments, whether in high-rise, townhouse, or other forms, some in the suburbs and others in redeveloped older neighborhoods. At the same time, the Ministry of Construction began articulating a market-based approach to the management of these newly built neighborhoods. They would be run by professional management companies, selected and hired by the owners themselves. Homeowners would form committees to choose and monitor these service providers (Davis, 2003; Wang & Murie, 1999; Zhou & Logan, 1996).

The Ministry of Construction first announced national policies for this in its "Methods for the Management of Newly Built Urban Residential Neighborhoods" of 1994 (Beijingshi, 1998). It called for committees to be "formed of elected representatives of the residential neighborhood's property owners and occupants." These groups were afforded a list of four "rights" (*quanli*), including that of "establishing a management charter and

representing the owners and occupants within the residential neighborhood, upholding the legal rights and interests of the property owners and occupants." These guidelines were updated in the "Property Management Regulations" issued by the State Council on June 8, 2003.⁶

Although the second policy statement also laid out several homeowner rights and affirmed the principle of electing YWH to oversee management, it also signaled a desire to rein in these new organizations. Here, the committees are merely defined as the "executive body" of the owners as a whole and possess "responsibilities" (*zhize*) rather than rights. The document indicates that the groups' powers should be confined to the hiring and firing of a management company and reiterates in several places that they are to be subordinate to government authorities. As important as these national policies have been, their actual implementation has been left up to city and provincial governments. Cities develop their own practical procedures for establishing YWH and holding elections. City governments further delegate authority over the homeowner groups to the district or subdistrict level.

The result is that, at the neighborhood level, three centers of competing interests jostle against one another. The first is the organizational efforts of homeowners themselves. Residents in some neighborhoods have banded together and mobilized powerful and sustained campaigns to establish a YWH and exercise its legally mandated powers. In many other cases, homeowners have been unable to mount such efforts. The second is the attitude of city officials. In most but not all situations, municipal cadres have taken a dim view of these groups, both because they have economic stakes in the development companies that are the homeowners' adversaries and because they are chary of groups outside their control. The third is the stance of developers and managers. They employ a range of strategies in dealing with their customers' demands, from guarded cooperation to stalling tactics to cooptation to physical intimidation and violence.

These forces, moreover, have evolved over time in a dynamic fashion. City governments initially retarded the development of YWH by denying approvals to most associations except for toothless committees controlled by the developers. Yet this stance has evolved in some cities, most dramatically in Shanghai. Housing authorities there switched to a policy of encouraging YWH while insisting that they be formed through a closely state-guided process. By the end of 2003, 4,756 homeowner committees had been established in Shanghai, an order of magnitude more than in other cities (interview, Xin Yiming, June 30, 2004).⁷ This figure also shows how these new organizations, initially confined to a handful of highly priced housing estates, are spreading to a much broader set of neighborhoods, including older and less wealthy ones.

In short, China's YWH have not emerged through a cookie-cutter process of replication. Instead, they exhibit a great deal of variation, and organization in each neighborhood has developed (or failed to develop) along distinctive lines shaped by the three sets of stakeholders. The remainder of the article analyzes the organizational outcomes that emerge from these conflicts. As established earlier, variation over time is a crucial dimension to explore. To do this, I begin by presenting two case studies in some detail, each of which highlights the evolution of such groups in changing circumstances. This pair of examples also sets the stage for comparison to the United States and among a larger set of cases within China.

Cases and Comparisons

Lijiang Gardens⁸

Lijiang Gardens is located about 15 kilometers south of Guangzhou on part of Nanpudao, an island amid the tributaries of the Pearl River. Construction began in the early 1990s, and by 2004, more than 10,000 housing units had been completed, grouped in nine distinct subneighborhoods, each at different price levels, ranging from tall apartment towers to townhouses to unattached houses. The development company is a joint venture backed by the provincial government and that of Panyu, the district in which Lijiang is located.

As of 2004, the homeowner committee had been in existence for more than six years and had gone through four elections. Throughout this period, the YWH had been closely linked to the developer and its affiliated management company and had only a dubious claim to legitimacy. In all four elections, the developer exercised heavy influence over the proceedings and went to great lengths to ensure that its favored candidates won. This was accomplished in part by keeping the balloting quiet (only around 200 residents out of 4,200 households cast votes in the first election in 1997 and around 1,000 out of 6,000 in the second election in 1999). Also, according to local regulations, the development company is permitted to cast votes for each of the unsold homes that still belong to it. All these advantages left the company firmly in control, making the YWH its puppet rather than a self-organized entity. But two major incidents resulted in large-scale homeowner mobilization and an attempt by disgruntled residents to win control of the committee.

The first arose when Lijiang announced in January 1999 that the price of a round-trip ticket on the commuter shuttle bus to downtown Guangzhou

would rise from 5 yuan to 7 yuan (about US\$0.63 to US\$0.88). Several hundred residents gathered in front of the management company's offices to protest. In the days that followed, they held a demonstration march within Lijiang and also sought redress from the provincial government and People's Congress. They boycotted the Lijiang bus by chartering vehicles and forming carpools. The management backed down by offering bulk-rate tickets at the original price.

The second dispute led to an even more prolonged period of resistance. It began in December 2002, when bulldozers appeared along the southern edge of Lijiang Gardens and began clearing trees and grass. Unbeknownst to the residents, the developers had cut a deal to lay a road more than 20 meters in width along that section of the neighborhood's perimeter to link a separate planned housing complex and the main highway. Many homeowners, particularly those with windows and balconies facing the road, were outraged, complaining that this directly contradicted the developer's assurances that the land would be preserved as bucolic green space shaded by peach trees. In the weeks that followed, several hundred residents staged a series of demonstrations in the name of upholding their rights (*weiquan*). On the night of December 31, participants camped in tents on the half-completed road bed. On January 19, they planted a hundred saplings there in symbolic protest. Meanwhile, the homeowners (many of whom worked in Guangzhou's media and advertising industry) used their connections to attract publicity, for instance with sympathetic articles in *Southern Metropolis*, a local newspaper renowned for pushing the limits of press freedom. They also sought help from provincial People's Congress representatives. Although the road was nonetheless built, the developers compromised and agreed to reduce its width and relocate it farther away from Lijiang homes.

Thus, residents responded to infringements on their property and related perquisites by forming their own organization and applying pressure on their antagonists. These efforts gave rise to a movement to take control of the official YWH, which had stayed quiet during this period rather than standing up for the homeowners it ostensibly represented. Guo Junlong, an insurance agent in his early 30s and a veteran of the road conflict, led the Little Homeowners Team in its challenge to the YWH incumbents. Ballots in this election were cast between December 15, 2003, and February 16, 2004. During this time, Guo—like other organizers during crucial periods—set his regular job aside and intensely focused on trying to rally support for his candidates in the election (“Wei Shequ Weiquan,” 2004).

On February 20, after employees of the management company opened the ballot boxes, it announced that the roughly 2,800 votes failed to meet the required threshold of 50% participation by the 10,210 homeowners. The election was declared invalid (“Lijiang Yewehui,” 2004). Late on the night of May 9, Guo was lured out of his apartment and physically beaten by two other residents; he suspects they were paid to do this by the developer. After recuperating, he decided to cease his involvement with the movement, leaving the organization leaderless. Another election later that year also ended in failure, and for a time a stalemate existed with no YWH at all, though this was to be followed by later waves of homeowner activism (Jia, 2005; Yang & Jiang, 2005). The Lijiang case thus highlights the scattered and episodic nature of residents’ efforts to organize and to confront the formidable power of the state and the property developers it backs. Yet it also shows some of the means that activists can use to advance their group’s cause—including noisy protests and media exposure—even in an authoritarian political setting.

Mountainview Homes⁹

The Mountainview Homes development lies far to the north of central Beijing. Construction began around 1993, and the population gradually rose to approximately 4,000 households after the neighborhood was fully built. Categorized as “ordinary homes” (*putong zhuzhai*), the rows of six-story apartment buildings bear a resemblance to older, socialist housing blocks in town, despite interiors that are spacious and modern. The units were relatively inexpensive, costing between 1,500 yuan and 2,200 yuan (about US\$180.00 and US\$275.00) per square meter.

Mountainview’s residents began organizing at the end of 1998. Their most urgent goal was to acquire deeds to the apartments for which they had paid. Four years after the sale of the units had commenced, the city government retroactively declared that the developer failed to follow proper legal procedures. The homes would remain illegal and ineligible for deeds until the developer paid a series of fines and taxes, especially the land transfer fee (*tudi churang jin*) that is incurred when village land is appropriated for urban housing construction.

Local officials cited technicalities in declaring Mountainview to be ineligible to establish a YWH and would only give their blessing to the forming of a “preparatory group.” Limited in this way but otherwise unrestrained, owners held a series of large-scale meetings. At one gathering of around 200 residents, a preparatory group was elected, entirely composed of homeowners. As of four years later, the formal status of the owner group had not

changed, yet it behaved in every way like a robust and fully authorized organization. During its most active period, the group held meetings twice a month, usually attended by 10 to 20 people. The group had no formal leadership, but Mrs. Zhu, a soft-spoken woman in her 50s with almost two decades of experience as a lawyer, gradually emerged as its center of gravity, with others deferring to her.

The preparatory group adopted a mode of action that featured persistent and assertive lobbying of government officials. It generally avoided behavior that might alienate those officials, such as demonstrations or lawsuits, although in at least one instance it did employ the threat of overt contention, as shown below. Group leaders visited state offices to plead their case, sometimes repeatedly, often bringing a delegation of homeowners with them to add emphasis. The developer initially refused to talk to the owner organization, but eventually it had no other choice, not least because some residents withheld fees and utility payments until demands were met. By negotiating with it and in some cases acceding to its demands, both the government and the developer informally came to acknowledge the preparatory group as the legitimate representative of the homeowners.

For a time, Zhu's group demonstrated an uncommon ability to exercise power and get results on behalf of the owners. Its most significant accomplishment was pressuring government authorities at the city, district, and township levels to compromise on the penalties and taxes they were demanding from the developer while also prevailing on the developer to meet those reduced demands. This cleared the way for the owners to receive their property deeds. The preparatory group also won a number of other victories. Mountainview initially had no telephone lines, and its electricity came from the inferior village-level grid, which supplied power only during certain hours of the day. A group of owners went to the government complaints (*xinfang*) office to take up these issues, bringing a letter signed by more than 200 households and threatening to come back in even larger numbers. This impelled the officials to work out a compromise with the developer that led to the provision of phone lines and more reliable electricity. The homeowners also won a public apology and 35,000 yuan (about US\$4,300.00) in compensation for a resident who suffered a broken wrist in a physical scuffle with an employee of the management company. All these events represented tangible gains won through persistent group action.

This successful self-organization and wielding of power did not last. In the summer of 2002, Mrs. Zhu and her husband moved out of Mountainview into a newer development, citing their desire to live in a neighborhood with parks and other amenities. For a while, she still received calls from her

former neighbors asking for help, but she resolved to leave her organizational work behind her. Her departure proved to be a blow. No one wanted to put in all the effort required to fill her shoes. As of mid-2004, the informal YWH had functionally ceased to exist. Mountainview illustrates how even successful organizations can have weaknesses stemming from a lack of institutionalization and overreliance on a single leader. Nonetheless, it complements Lijiang in showing methods through which YWH can exert a surprising degree of influence.

Comparison to the United States

A number of similarities to U.S. homeowner groups emerge in the above accounts and in other cases that, because of space constraints, can only be briefly presented. The major goals that these organizations pursue concern matters of material interest—deeds, bus tickets, the promise of pleasing orchard views. This affirms Warren's (2001) basic classification of such groups as having "money" as their "constitutive media of association" (p. 109). Their political activity, just as Dilger (1992) observed in the American case, tends to be reactive, defending what they feel is rightfully theirs against perceived incursions. Much of the time, a small core of activists handles most of the work and at times struggles to stimulate the involvement of the broader community. All of this underscores the validity of the cross-national dimension of the comparison.

Although the Chinese YWH belong to the same basic species as their U.S. counterparts, we also observe significant differences, which can be traced to theoretically meaningful roots. As McKenzie (1994) stressed, purchasers of homes in U.S. common-interest developments automatically join an organization built into the legal arrangements for shared ownership. In China, the associational structure is far more contingent and fluid. Whether it comes into being, what form it takes, who actually controls it, and what it does all depend on many factors. This means that self-organization is much harder to achieve in China. The groups struggle to start and require grim tenacity to survive. Because the creation and survival of organizations that can stand up to the nexus of developers and the local state usually hinge on the efforts of a few determined people, they tend to have an individualized character, revolving around leaders such as Guo and Zhu. They easily lapse into disarray if a key organizer leaves or is bought off.¹⁰

Two U.S. researchers wryly quoted the conventional wisdom that "upon turnover of the association to the unit owners, the first three things they do are raise the assessment, fire the manager, and sue the developer" (Hyatt &

Rhoads, 1976, p. 919, cited in Rosenblum, 1998, p. 129). This reminds us that conflicts over this form of property are hardly unique to China. But grievances are especially compelling in the Chinese case, where housing markets are new and consumer protection weak. In addition to myriad details of construction quality (interviewees complained of everything from shoddy elevators to cheap wood floors to leaky roofs), basic matters such as deeds, the use of large maintenance funds, and, most fundamentally, control over the neighborhood are at stake. This has the effect of whipping up broader and more vociferous participation under certain conditions, discussed below.

Contracts and the legal system play a less central role in the Chinese case. To be sure, owners commonly seek redress through lawsuits. But many parts of China's legal system remain weakly institutionalized and highly susceptible to backdoor influence from the government and interested parties. This can increase participation in the YWH by homeowners when they are frustrated by failure in individualized lawsuits and instead turn to collective action. As Guo Junlong learned, developers sometimes resort to threatened or actual violence to protect their privileges. Although this can suppress homeowner activism, as when Guo chose to lie low after his beating, it can instead enrage the intended targets and push them to redouble their efforts.

Rather than courts, other sources of power and forms of pressure loom larger. Local government becomes a crucial center of influence, as it controls resources ranging from legitimation of the homeowner organization to property deeds. Although the local authorities are not subject to formal mechanisms of accountability from below such as votes, they have an interest in maintaining peace and stability and can be open to informal channels of input.¹¹ Owner-activists therefore launch efforts to influence them, whether through quiet means such as lobbying or working personal connections (*guanxi*) or noisier means such as public protest.

The authoritarian nature of the political system paradoxically heightens the appeal of homeowner activism for some organizers. Although rank-and-file residents generally do not see these associations as part of any larger cause, a surprising number of YWH leaders spoke of their work as the leading edge of political change in China, articulating themes of rights consciousness, empowerment, and democratization. Guo Junlong was an example of such a leader, speaking of the idea that taxpayers "buy government" just as homeowners buy the services of management companies and that his compatriots will progress "from consumers to homeowners to citizens" (interview, December 26, 2003). One successful organizer went

on to establish a vibrant national Web page known as the Homeowner Alliance. Another had essentially become a full-time consultant to other organizers, adopting the slogan "changing China through the place of residence" (*juzhu gaibian zhongguo*; interview, July 21, 2004). This individual and others had gone from homeowner activism to the rare and usually futile practice of running as independent candidates for the largely party-controlled People's Congress. In the 2003 Beijing elections for this body, six out of about two dozen independent would-be candidates were homeowner organizers. Of four independent candidates who managed to persist through the government weed-out process and win election to these assemblies in Beijing and Shenzhen, one was a YWH leader.¹²

Within-China Comparison

These features of China's homeowners' groups point to ways in which political, legal, and other contexts shape the civic properties of associations, as will be discussed in the conclusion. But the Lijiang and Mountainview cases also begin to suggest the great variation that exists among individual YWH. Certain factors that affect groups' performance on the three criteria are difficult to theorize. In some cases, local authorities are particularly hostile and cow the would-be organizers (Northeast Towers, interview, October 22, 2000). In other cases, residents happen to possess relationships with powerful figures in the city government and thus obtain favorable treatment for the neighborhood.¹³ These partially random factors aside, it is possible to discern patterns of regular variation between neighborhoods.

Size of neighborhood. Achieving self-organization and rousing the participation of large numbers of peers is no mean feat in China's new housing estates. Even under the best of circumstances, homeowners can be difficult to coordinate. Many work long hours, leaving them little time for meetings. Some rent out their homes and live elsewhere. Moreover, official guidelines set a high threshold for decision making; the 2003 national regulations, for example, require a quorum of fully one half of all owners at certain meetings. Finally, the problem of free riding haunts the YWH: The benefits of successful collective action (e.g., reduced management fees) are shared by all, whereas the costs are only paid by those who take part. As one organizer said about the problem of translating grievances into even a single meeting, "It's easy for people to be angry, but who makes the 400 phone calls?" (Vista Towers, interview, July 28, 2003).

Given this situation, it is not surprising that collective action is hardest to mount and sustain in the largest neighborhoods. Lijiang, with its 10,000 units, exemplifies these difficulties. The opposition faction lacked easy means of communicating with fellow residents; it could not rely on their mailboxes, as the management company had a history of removing material critical of it. Web pages and e-mail help but allow only contact with Internet-literate residents who are already aligned with the cause. In smaller neighborhoods, the task of mobilizing one's neighbors is more tractable. In Beijing's Park Town, it was relatively straightforward for two activists to get in contact with a majority of the 100 other residents, even though the managers refused to provide their names and phone numbers. The efforts of these two women led to the establishment of a successful YWH (Park Town, interview, November 28, 2000). With a committed group of organizers, it is feasible to pull together even communities of 500 or 700 households (Golden Gardens, interview, November 2, 2000, and July 23, 2003; Southview Mansions, interview, October 24, 2000, and July 12, 2003), but the difficulty increases as the number of homes climbs into the thousands.

Commonality of interests. Regarding American RCAs, Rosenblum (1998) comments that "dissension over the appearance and use of property and over day-to-day conduct is universal. *Anything* is sufficient cause: noise, dogs, fences, garbage, crab grass, parking, snubs and slights" (p. 119). Setha Low's (2003) account also points to sociological fault lines in U.S. gated communities, such as between "empty nesters" and families with young children (p. 179). In China, what is at stake in these conflicts is not just neighborly sentiment but the ability to self-organize and exert power.

One might imagine that diversity of interests within a neighborhood could beneficially stimulate participation and debate. But the opposite appears true. In Guangdi Gardens, owners were split over tactics but also between the minority of residents who were directly affected by the property title fraud and the majority who were not (Cheng, 2003; interview, December 26, 2003; also see "'Guangdi Huayuan Shijian' Toudi" [A Perspective on the "Guangdi Gardens Incident"], an analysis posted on the legal Web site <http://www.chineselawyer.com.cn>). In many other neighborhoods as well, unity was undermined by divisions between mainland Chinese nationals and expatriates or overseas Chinese, between locals and itinerant businesspeople from elsewhere in China, and so forth.¹⁴

The YWH in Fragrant Gardens, an estate in the northeast suburbs of Beijing, seemed to have gotten off to a successful start but foundered because of internal strife. A group of the first home buyers, led by a lawyer

and a university professor, declared the establishment of an owner committee and were able to switch management companies not just once but twice. Other residents, however, disputed the legitimacy of the hastily arranged YWH election and disagreed with the committee's exhorting people to withhold payment of management fees as a way to apply pressure on the developer over home quality issues. A bitter conflict raged on the neighborhood's online and physical bulletin boards between dog owners and those who wanted dogs banned, some of whom threatened to spread poison in the section of lawn used for dog walking. As of the summer of 2004, all members of the committee had resigned, and for a time, no management company was in place to run the facilities. Trash piled up as residents fumed at one another, incapable of coming together in any kind of collective effort (four residents of Fragrant Gardens, interview, July 27, 2003, and July 18, 2004).

Intensity of grievances and conflict. Individual YWH change greatly over time. Most significantly, conflict and contestation wax and wane. As has been shown, conflict very commonly takes the form of a struggle for control of the neighborhood, pitting owners against the land developer and its proxies. Intertwined with this are disputes over specific grievances, from fee schedules to maintenance funds to fraud. Another form of conflict involves a grassroots movement of homeowners striving to overthrow a developer-backed YWH, as seen in Lijiang Gardens.

It is in these contentious situations that the groups do the most to encourage broad participation, holding "big meetings" or rallies and trying to enlist the support of large numbers of fellow homeowners. Leaders put in long hours, intensely focusing as if engaged in a military campaign. They do their best to demonstrate how accessible they are to input from the rank and file. Ordinary residents too become caught up in the fight. In terms of our third criterion, it is also conflict that drives the YWH to flex their muscles, whether by engaging in contentious tactics like marches and the hanging of protest banners or by aggressive lobbying of local officials. In short, members' participation and the groups' exercising of power are enhanced by conflict and contestation.¹⁵

Conversely, once established, in control of the neighborhood, and recognized by the government, the YWH often switch from contentious tactics to less noisy forms of negotiation. They also tend to lose some of their enthusiasm for regular and open meetings. Leaders feel that their mandate is beyond question, having been earned through hard work. In Guangzhou's Cold Springs Apartments, chairwoman Cai—who had triumphantly founded

her neighborhood's YWH in 1997, winning favorable media coverage and replacing the management company—felt comfortable entirely dispensing with the cycle of biennial elections.¹⁶ A Chongqing YWH “collapsed,” one participant attested, after having achieved its major objectives of obtaining property deeds and lowering parking fees (Chrysanthemum Towers, interview, December 14, 1999). Even in the relatively inert phases of their life cycle, low-conflict YWH may still be open to residents' requests and maintain a latent capacity to mobilize. Still, they score distinctly lower on our criteria of participation and in some cases on self-organization and the ability to exercise power.

State involvement. Finally, neighborhoods vary in the degree and manner in which the state took part in establishing the YWH. At one extreme, heavy-handed guidance by local officials is characteristic of cases where “puppet” committees act as mere fronts for the interests of government-sponsored developers. Yet *absence* of state involvement does not guarantee a well-functioning owner organization. This is certainly a lesson of a case such as Fragrant Gardens, where the YWH fell apart despite being entirely unhindered by the authorities.

An example from Shanghai illustrates an intermediate form of state involvement. The YWH of Pearl Center came to power through a process of indirect elections run by the local government housing office. First, the authorities had selected 51 “owner representatives.” A few of these individuals were self-nominated, but most were recommended by the local party branch and by the developer and property management company. These representatives voted to elect a slate of 15 people to the YWH; there was no competition among the candidates. The committee members selected a retired Communist Party official from a large state-owned enterprise as director. All this might well suggest a toothless and undemocratic organization, yet its behavior proved otherwise. The YWH convened an open meeting in each of the neighborhood's three subdivisions to establish an agenda. It then pursued its top priorities aggressively, suing the developer over a costly tax error it had made and a building it had sold off that the owners believed to be theirs and lobbying the court for favorable decisions. The director elicited input from the development's nearly 1,200 households on major decisions such as which bank to use for the maintenance fund and whether to spend money to improve handicapped access. This was done in an indirect way, not at mass meetings but by posting information on a bulletin board, then having the owner

representatives circulate documents to individual homes and collect signatures (interview, July 2 and 3, 2004).¹⁷

From the standpoint of civil society criteria, cases such as Pearl Center indicate a trade-off. The YWH there is only partly self-organized, and it is unlikely to challenge state officials head-on, yet it represents the owners in important ways and moreover, it is coherent, avoiding the strife found in other neighborhoods. In short, for organizations in this type of setting (a weakly institutionalized legal environment, with high monetary stakes and high costs of organizing), minimum state involvement is not necessarily the route to the healthiest organizations. Where government authority is used to create a stable representative structure, rather than to impose an ersatz simulacrum of representation, the result can feature an intermediate level of participation and nontrivial ability to exert power.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, homeowner groups occupy a particularly controversial position in studies of local politics and civil society, attracting both passionate critics and dogged defenders. Both sides of the debate capture aspects of empirical reality, which is precisely the point, one that contains broad lessons for the study of the political behavior of associations. Characterizing homeowner groups (or just about any organization) in toto as one thing or another misses opportunities to build on the theory of civil society by examining and explaining variation. This article has tried to push debate forward by inquiring when and why CSOs are able to form, sustain themselves, and do the things that give them value in the eyes of political theorists rather than leaving these issues unproblematized, as is generally the case in existing studies.

The strong positions scholars have taken on the political effects of property-based groups mainly derive from studies of just one country-case, the United States. More perspective is obtained by broadening the empirical focus. As we have seen, Chinese homeowner organizers resemble their counterparts abroad, yet the authoritarian political system and other features of institutional context also make the way they operate distinctive. The absence of reliable channels for conflict resolution drives them to contentious practices. They are fueled by a seemingly unending stream of problems and grievances that are made particularly common by the irregularities of the transitional market and the inadequacy of regulation. And they attract not merely individuals who wish to lower their monthly condo fee but also some who pursue broader political change. Thus, we see that like other

common interests, private property does not deterministically lend itself to the creation of just one kind of organization, benign or pernicious.

As previously observed, one critique of homeowner groups in the U.S. context is that they “privatize” politics, turning it away from public town council meetings and inward toward closed gatherings of only those who own property in gated enclaves. The Chinese case suggests that from a civil society standpoint, there are reasons to applaud this rather than boo. Politics under the communist regime is already “cellularized” in many respects, working by design to keep the public divided into countless micro communities, whether in the village, the neighborhood, or the workplace (Shue, 1988). Within a political sphere that is in most respects closed to meaningful democratic participation, establishing air pockets of relatively free and participatory action—even if in a local and private fashion—is a step forward. Moreover, as we have seen, these organizations create connections both within and beyond the locality in remarkable ways: through Web-based and person-to-person networking and by giving neighborhood leaders experience in organization, resistance, and applying pressure on the government.

All this leads to a general point pertaining to the question of civil society’s meaning under multiple types of political regime. The broader political context clearly has tremendous effects on grassroots organizations, yet the disjuncture between authoritarian and democratic settings can be multifaceted and more nuanced than one might expect. This illustrates the need for fine-grained analysis of all the ways in which states shape the environment for CSOs. Even as the Chinese authoritarian state suppresses many forms of independent association, it also unwittingly encourages some kinds of contention and participation, creating opportunities for civic action.

Micro-level factors are just as important as the overall environment for understanding what allows some groups to flourish whereas others fail. Smaller neighborhoods and those with fewer internal fault lines were found to have a better chance at producing cohesive homeowner groups. Moreover, organizations change over time, becoming most participatory and politically active when grievances and conflict galvanize them. Although excessive state shepherding can be smothering, complete uninvolvement by local government does not always lead to robust associations. A modest degree of structuring by the authorities can help owners establish unified organizations that represent their interests, even though this compromises their independence.

Now well into its second decade, the Chinese homeowner movement faces serious obstacles, though it also has prospects for considerable growth

and expansion. The privatization of urban residential housing will not be reversed, and demands arising from property rights will continue to drive owners to band together in search of solutions. The preliminary analysis here has attempted to point out avenues to follow in empirically studying such phenomena and addressing the theoretical questions they raise. There is a tendency for observers to bring a heavy set of preconceptions to the study of civil society in authoritarian settings, whether by seeking in vain for the next Solidarity movement or by belittling what is found as politically inert. Much of the time, its actual significance is neither dramatic nor trivial, just like under democratic regimes. Under the right conditions, in a rather incremental way, it can help to bring people into engagement with those around them and involvement in collective self-governance. In turn, this can help foster state agencies that are more willing to tolerate, listen to, and negotiate with self-organized constituencies. A ground-level, organizational focus will allow us to more carefully explore these conditions and acquire a clearer picture of civil society's actual benefits and limitations.

Appendix Table of Cases

City	Case	Name or Pseudonym	Status of Homeowner Organization as of 2004
Beijing	1	Springtime Center	Unapproved but owner controlled
	2	Morningside Place	Unapproved; in disarray
	3	White Deer Gardens	Developer controlled, government approved
	4	Northeast Towers	Unapproved; in disarray
	5	Capital Apartments	Unapproved but owner controlled
	6	Southview Mansions	Fully owner controlled, government approved
	7	Golden Gardens	Unapproved but owner controlled
	8	Mountainview Homes	Formerly an active, unofficial, owner-controlled organization; then collapsed
	9	Twin Sycamores	Unapproved; in disarray
	10	Park Town	Fully owner controlled, government approved
	11	Orchid Center	Unapproved but owner controlled
	12	Fragrant Gardens	Had been owner controlled and government approved but collapsed
	13	Swan Gardens	Fully owner controlled, government approved
	14	Sunshine Apartments	Fully owner controlled, government approved
	15	Vista Towers	Unapproved but owner controlled
Chongqing	16	Chrysanthemum Towers	Had been owner controlled and government approved but inactive

Guangzhou	17	Sunrise Place	Had been owner controlled and government approved but collapsed
	18	Cold Springs Apartments	Fully owner controlled, government approved
	19	Lijiang Gardens ^a	Developer controlled, challenged by owner movements
Shanghai	20	Guangdi Gardens ^a	Unapproved; in disarray
	21	Pearl Center	Structured and approved by government; partially owner controlled
	22	Riverside Park	Structured and approved by government; partially owner controlled
	23	Rainbow Plaza	Structured and approved by government; partially owner controlled

a. Real name. See Note 1.

Notes

1. The neighborhoods and homeowners in this article are referred to by pseudonyms unless otherwise noted. Lijiang Gardens and Guangdi Gardens are exceptions, as they have been the subject of extensive media coverage. Lijiang's official English name is Riverside Garden.

2. Existing research on these groups and their context includes Read (2003), Tomba (2005), and Kelly (2006). Chinese-language studies have been omitted here because of space constraints.

3. *Yewehui* is short for *yezhu weiyuanhui*, the full term for *owner committee*.

4. I follow Larry Diamond (1999) in defining *civil society* as "the realm of organized social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating, at least partially self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules" (p. 221).

5. For other critical perspectives, see Silverman and Barton (1988) and Blakely and Snyder (1997).

6. The Ministry of Construction Web site records these regulations (*xingzheng fagui*) at <http://www.cin.gov.cn/law/admin/2003062002.htm>. They went into effect September 1, 2003.

7. Beijing had established 566 *yewehui* by the end of 2003, according to an interview with Beijing housing officials Zou Jinsong and Li Lanying (July 23, 2004).

8. This sketch is primarily based on interviews conducted April 12, 2000, and December 26 and 27, 2003. In addition to the cited newspaper articles, it also draws on "Lijiang Huayuan Weiquan Ji" (Upholding Rights in Lijiang Gardens), a detailed, unpublished account written in the spring of 2003 by Fang Sanwen, a professional journalist and Lijiang homeowner.

9. This sketch is based on interviews with the principal organizer, Mrs. Zhu, conducted November 7, 2000, July 27, 2003, and July 18, 2004.

10. Interviews uncovered a colorful variety of ways in which developers attempted to buy off key organizers, often successfully. One was allowed to sell her problem-ridden home back and move out. One became a real estate agent specializing in deals referred by the developer, and another accepted the use of commercial property located in her neighborhood. Yet another organizer was told to file a lawsuit against the developer that the latter would deliberately lose.

11. For examples of ways in which the Chinese state can sometimes exhibit porosity, see Kennedy (2005) and O'Brien and Li (2006).

12. For these details, I am indebted to Renmin University professor Chen Youhong.
13. This was the case, for instance, in two Beijing neighborhoods fortunate enough to have high-ranking officials among their residents (Park Town, interview, November 28, 2000; Sunshine Apartments, interview, July 12, 2003).
14. Among other cases, these divisions were mentioned by organizers in Morningside Place on November 6, 1999, and in Twin Sycamores on November 9, 2000.
15. The basic insight that conflict strengthens group cohesion dates back to early-20th-century sociology and has been applied to ethnic groups but rarely civil society organizations more broadly (see Coser, 1956; Horowitz, 1985; Simmel, 1964).
16. I conducted two long interviews with Cai on April 11, 2000, and December 27, 2003. The early part of this neighborhood's struggle is documented in Chen (1999).
17. Two other neighborhoods in Shanghai, Riverside Park and Rainbow Plaza, where I conducted interviews July 4 and July 20, 2004, exhibited similar patterns of government structuring that did not preclude homeowner participation and activism.

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