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JOHN R. LOGAN, ED. URBAN CHINA IN TRANSITION  
(BLACKWELL, 2008)

14

## The State's Evolving Relationship with Urban Society: China's Neighborhood Organizations in Comparative Perspective

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Throughout its nearly 60 years of existence, the People's Republic of China has made mighty efforts to *organize* urban society. It has sought to co-opt, manage, or dominate major forms of organization within the cities, including those based on workplace, trade or profession, religion, and place of residence. Today, the world of organizations within urban Chinese society can no longer be thought of as a monopoly by the Party-state, given the prevalence of private firms and the emergence of NGOs, migrant communities, homeowners' groups, and other phenomena. The official organizational apparatus nonetheless remains highly salient, though poorly understood.

This chapter considers a major portion of this apparatus: the dense and pervasive network of roughly 90,000 neighborhood organizations known as Residents' Committees (RCs).<sup>2</sup> The committee staff are paid by the state to serve as its designated liaisons, in most cases operating out of a permanent local office. The members act as the grassroots 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 public-benefit activities for them to take part in if they choose. (Space constraints preclude a full bibliography on RCs here, but see Benewick,

Tong, and Howell (2004), Derleth and Koldyk (2004), and Read (2000, 2003).

The RCs and organizations like them in other countries 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 work hard to build an image of responsiveness. They combine service functions with routine monitoring and complicity in occasional episodes of repression; their work involves a mixture of gentleness and domination.

In terms of the various perspectives put forward by Logan and Fainstein in this volume's introduction, modernization theorists would nod their heads at the challenges these grassroots organizations face in staying connected to an increasingly mobile, affluent, and privacy-conscious society. Scholars of state socialism would quickly identify analogous institutions in places like Cuba, Vietnam, and the former Soviet Union. Yet both would be puzzled by the persistence of state-linked neighborhood groups not just in ostensibly post-socialist China but also in other Asian countries that are even more modern and less socialist. While China fits only problematically into the mold of nearby "developmental states," aspects of this body of theory may be most fruitful in considering the RCs and their counterparts abroad.

### Theoretical Context

Studies of socialist cities around the world have provided accounts of neighborhood-level groups that resemble those in China (Colomer 2000; Fagen 1969; Friedgut 1979; Koh 2006; Roeder 1989). On the face of it, such general accounts of state socialism would seem to provide the theoretical framework we need. Communist Parties everywhere propagated "mass organizations" through which to incorporate and monitor society. True, these kinds of organizations collapsed in the regime transitions in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Yet this in itself hardly makes the RCs anomalous; while China is "post-socialist" in the sense of having enthusiastically embraced market practices in many parts of the economic realm, the governing apparatus still has much in common with other socialist cases.

We argue, however, that to see the RCs merely within a "comparative communism" context is inadequate for several reasons. Far from allowing them to atrophy, the Chinese government has taken active steps to develop and revitalize these organizations in the past two decades. While their counterparts elsewhere in the socialist bloc are often seen as having left a wholly negative legacy of distrust (Howard 2003), the RCs are perceived in a much more variegated and often positive way. Most tellingly, in many respects they closely

resemble counterpart organizations in East and Southeast Asian states that never were socialist and indeed were strongly anticommunist.

These local groups are best understood as manifestations of a broader phenomenon, *grassroots 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. Crucially, grassroots engagement is not confined to one type of political system; variants can be found under democracies, semi-democracies, and authoritarian as well as state-socialist regimes. But the countries that develop these institutions do share a set of pre-requisites. Only *strong* states have the bureaucratic coherence and organizational capacity to establish this form of grassroots presence. They share a desire, initially rooted in *security concerns*, to monitor and influence society at the neighborhood or household level, even though security is only one of many purposes served by such institutions. Finally, they are relatively *illiberal*, lacking deep commitment to principled prohibitions on government organization of society.<sup>3</sup>

An example such as Peru, along with the Cuban and Soviet cases mentioned above, demonstrates that these kinds of institutions can be found in many parts of the world (Stepan 1978, ch. 5). Yet some of the most elaborate and persistent examples are found in East and Southeast Asia. Indonesian society, for example, is finely subdivided into small units comprising clusters of households and groups of such clusters (known as *rukun tetanga* and *rukun warga*, respectively) that work closely with the state (Guinness 1986; Sullivan 1992). In Singapore, too, the government's People's Association runs an elaborate network of grassroots groups, such as the Resident's Committees and Neighbourhood Committees (Meow 1987).

Why are these parts of Asia such fertile soil for these institutions? Here it is worth turning to accounts of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, which identified several features shared by these "developmental states." These countries possessed uncommonly strong states featuring coherent and capable bureaucracies. Far from governing in a hands-off way, administrators actively shaped their constituencies through corporatist links. Far from allowing society and the economy to develop haphazardly, they pursued interventionist strategies of partnering with, guiding and disciplining the firms and sectors that they oversaw (Amsden 1989; Evans 1995; Haggard 1990; Johnson 1982; Wade 1992).

The similarities among these cases have been attributed to several factors. "Late" industrialization (relative to the West) impelled the state to take an especially active role in guiding development. The Cold War created a strong security imperative, and the US provided military protection, open markets, aid funds and policy guidance. Land reforms instilled social leveling and spurred productivity. Finally, some scholars emphasized historical legacies stemming in part from Japanese colonization in the first half of the twentieth

century; some also found common roots deeper in the past, such as traditions of recruiting bureaucrats through exams and prizing education as a route to advancement.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the developmental state literature is hardly tailor-made for explaining neighborhood administration. These theories were created in order to explain growth, hence they focus most sharply on *economic* institutions and policies, ignoring other important aspects of these governing systems. A brief look at specific historical links among these cases (Taiwan and South Korea, in addition to China) helps to clarify the common heritage that in part underpins similar approaches to urban governance.

The pre-requisites mentioned above – strong states, security concerns, and collectivist rather than liberal traditions – figure prominently in all three of these cases during the post-World War II era. In addition, rulers in each case had particularly robust historical templates to look to in constructing the machinery of ultra-local governance. The *bao-jia* established by China's Qing (1644–1911) and earlier dynasties grouped households into clusters so that roughly ten formed a *jia* and ten *jia* formed a *bao* (Hsiao 1967). The state designated headmen for each group and assigned them such tasks as keeping lists of the residents and reporting suspicious activity. During their colonization of Taiwan in 1895, Japanese administrators adapted and tightened up the *bao-jia* system, and freighted it with duties relating to public health, road construction, and taxation, in addition to its surveillance and registration functions (Chen 1975; Ts'ai 1990; Yao 2002).

As Japan occupied and colonized other parts of Asia in the twentieth century, it established either *bao-jia* or similar bodies (Chen 1984: 225–6). Korea, whose dynastic heritage also included state-imposed systems of household registration and collective responsibility,<sup>5</sup> was organized into small groups called *ban* in 1917. In 1940, these were re-dubbed “patriotic ban” [*aegukban*] (Seo 2002). “Each association consisted of ten households, and this became the basic unit for a variety of government programs for collection of contributions, imposition of labor service, maintenance of local security, and for rationing” (Eckert et al. 1990, p. 321). Japan introduced similar units, called *tonarigumi*, to Indonesia during its wartime occupation (Sullivan 1992, p. 136).

One might imagine that anything associated with previous rulers (especially the Japanese conquerors) would be rejected by the post-war governments of South Korea, Taiwan, and mainland China. But the ROK, ROC and PRC each reestablished systems of ultra-local administration both in the countryside and the cities. In Korea, the Syngman Rhee government kept in place the basic *ban* structure, once again renamed as “citizen's ban” [*kungminban*].<sup>6</sup> While its heyday of mass participation came in the 1970s under Park Chung Hee's “revitalization,” the basic structure still exists. The Kuomintang (KMT), which itself had deployed *bao-jia* during its struggle with the Chinese communists, brought to Taiwan the administrative setup it had employed on the mainland,

including urban neighborhood units known as *li*. In China, meanwhile, the new regime purged the former *bao*-heads as it cleansed the cities of KMT legacies, but soon formally mandated the establishment of neighborhood-based Residents' Committees in a 1954 law. Today Japan itself features a dense network of neighborhood associations that cooperate closely with local government (Bestor 1989, Pekkanen 2006).

In each case the new government hardly wished to acknowledge a debt to prior systems of social control. And the new institutions embodied substantial departures from their antecedents, far from merely aping them. The RCs in particular, in keeping with the CCP's brand of mass mobilization and guided participation, took on a great variety of educational and other service tasks, such as literacy classes and newspaper reading groups. Nonetheless, the core functional echo of the past – recruitment of local deputies to facilitate policing and governance through their ties with neighbors – could hardly be mistaken.

This micro-level organization of society persists to this day. In Taiwan, city districts are divided into neighborhoods, known as *li*. Each *li* is directed by a *lizhang*, who is paid no formal salary but receives a monthly stipend of around US\$1,500, ostensibly for work-related expenses. Once appointed by the formerly dominant KMT party, the island's approximately 4,800 *lizhang* are now elected to four-year terms by their constituents.<sup>7</sup> Working hand-in-hand with an unelected civil servant known as a *liganshi*, the *lizhang* handle a range of official duties under the supervision of the district authorities. South Korea's roughly 58,000 urban *tongjang* perform a similar set of functions, though they are appointed rather than elected and their stipends are much smaller.<sup>8</sup> Just as the *lizhang* draw on the help of a set of volunteers known as *linzhang*, each of whom takes responsibility for a small section of the neighborhood, so too the *tongjang* are aided by *banjang*. Like China's RCs, these institutions operate in close proximity to residents. In Taipei, there are approximately 2,000 households per *li* and 100 per *lin*, while in Seoul, there are about 250 households per *tong* and 34 per *ban*.<sup>9</sup>

State-sponsored institutions of grassroots engagement have received relatively little study within the social sciences. Yet any thorough analysis of the way cities work in China or elsewhere in East Asia must take them into account. In this chapter, we pursue two goals. The first is to provide an empirical overview of the RC system, focused on Beijing. This not only makes clear how the system works and what it does, but illustrates urban governments' efforts to bolster and revamp this organizational network in recent years in response to several sets of changing circumstances. The second is to lay out in a more analytic fashion the multiple ways in which individuals within the urban population respond to and interact with this system. How much contact do city residents have with these committees? How do the RCs help or harm them? Do people perceive this system in a positive or a negative light?

The chapter draws upon several different types of data. The first author spent 14 months in 1999 and 2000 carrying out research in Beijing, centering on 10 neighborhood sites around the city. He made short trips to six other cities (Qingdao, Shijiazhuang, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hengyang, and Benxi), in order to visit neighborhoods there, and conducted follow-up research in July 2003, December 2003, and July 2004. A series of private interviews with Beijing residents afforded perspectives on their attitudes toward and participation in neighborhood organizations. These topics were also the focus of a battery of questions on the 2001 Beijing Law and Community Survey (BLCS). He also carried out fieldwork on Taiwan's *lizhang* (December 2003; March–April 2006; January 2007) and South Korea's *long/ban* system (July 2004). The second author has conducted an opinion survey and other research on Taiwan's *lizhang*.

### Residents' Committees in Beijing and Elsewhere

As mentioned earlier, the RCs form an immense network covering a large majority of China's urban neighborhoods, with the exception of some newly built housing developments and recently urbanized areas. Details of the organizational setup vary from place to place, but it follows a single basic template. Table 14.1 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. The latter directly manage the RCs, maintaining a specialized staff to liaise with the committees and frequently calling their members in for meetings and instructions. As of 2003, Beijing's RCs averaged around 3,700 constituents, or 1,350 households, each. These numbers indicate that the RCs' jurisdictions are still small enough that its staff can be personally familiar with a substantial proportion of the residents. Through this system, the state reaches deep into the fabric of neighborhood life.

The RCs facilitate a range of state policies and programs, including:

- assisting the police by sharing information with officers from the local sub-station (*paichusuo*);
- helping to maintaining household registry (*hukou*) records;
- helping to implement the one-child-per-family birth control policy;
- facilitating welfare programs by keeping tabs on disadvantaged individuals; and
- conveying information from the state concerning laws, campaigns, programs, and policies.

Some of these functions, such as assisting with the one-child policy, are not found in Taiwan and South Korea because comparable family planning

**Table 14.1** Levels of administration in Beijing and other Chinese cities

Level	Chinese term	Number in Beijing	Number nationwide
City	<i>shi zhengfu</i>	1	660
Government			
District	<i>qu zhengfu</i>	(in city core) 8	830
Government			
Street Office	<i>jiedao banshichu</i>	105	5,576
Residents' Committee	<i>jurmin weivuanhui</i>	1,822	91,893

The national figure for City Governments includes prefecture-level [*difang*] cities, county-level [*xianji*] cities, and the four provincial-level cities. All Beijing figures do not include the outlying suburbs, including nine districts and two counties, that are part of the greater Beijing administrative region.

Source: National figures for Cities, Districts, and Street Offices: *China Statistical Yearbook 2003*, Table 1–1 (2002 data); national figures for RCs: *China Civil Affairs Statistical Yearbook 2002* (2001 data); Beijing Street Offices: *Beijing Statistical Yearbook 2002* (2001 data); Beijing RCs: unpublished figures for the year 2003 from the Beijing city government, on file with Read.

programs do not exist there. Yet the *lizhang* and the *longjang* are also sometimes asked to help police gather information concerning crime cases. The *lizhang* are only peripherally involved in household registry records, but do help determine welfare eligibility. The *longjang* help keep the household registry up-to-date, organize civil defense preparation, and together with the *banjang* form part of an elaborate system to convey information from the national, city, and district governments to neighborhood dwellers. Indeed, the *banjang* circulate official publications and convene meetings of *ban* residents at which the primary agenda item generally is the presentation of a set of messages and announcements from higher state authorities – though these meetings, called *bansanghoh*, are in many places held irregularly rather than at the monthly intervals that were once enforced.

Returning to the Chinese case, all of the above programs *could* be carried out by police or social workers without the permanent, neighborhood-based apparatus of the RC. Why then go to the trouble and expense of maintaining grassroots engagement bodies? What these functions all have in common is that they are all made much easier and less disruptive when conducted by individuals who are deeply familiar with the locality and the people in it. Many involve gathering “local knowledge” that bureaucrats in state offices far removed from the neighborhood would otherwise have no access to.

It is important to note that the actual character of these state-assigned functions varies and most of them are ambiguous in their relationship to residents' interests. In each case, the RC could be doing something that intrudes, inconveniences, or otherwise strikes people as noxious. Yet it could also be

doing something residents perceive as beneficial. The RC's policing-related tasks certainly do involve helping the authorities sniff out political dissent – which some residents might object to. Yet the great majority of their work with the police revolves around efforts to prevent burglary, talking to former offenders in the neighborhood, and such – all of which is quite likely to be seen in a favorable light.

The previous paragraphs have focused specifically on what could be termed the “hard” functions of the RC, the things it does that have a major payoff to the state in terms of policing and policy implementation. 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 information-collector. These functions include:

- listening to input from residents, serving as sounding boards for all manner of complaints and suggestions from their constituents;
- mediating disputes between neighbors and within families;
- providing a range of small goods and services, usually free of charge, such as measuring blood pressure;
- leading charity collection drives; and
- coordinating collective action in response to local problems such as theft, trash disposal, and vermin.

These many tasks have both a “face-value” function as well as an underlying purpose. They aim to bring the RC into contact with as many constituents as possible in a benign context. They also strive to build interpersonal familiarity between RC staff and residents, and develop a feeling that the RC is looking out for the interests of the public.

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 or civic activities in a more active and sustained way. Some Beijing committees lead 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,” “court-yard heads,”<sup>31</sup> 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 RC with many aspects of its work, from disseminating announcements to keeping in contact with welfare cases. But activists don't just work on behalf of the RC; they may also do 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, 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.

### A Changing Institution

Understanding the evolution of the RCs requires thinking about three aspects of change. The first consists of the structures of the state and the administrative programs they carry out. The second is the evolving physical and spatial setting of residential neighborhoods. The third consists of the needs and preferences of residents relative to the RCs.

Ever since its founding, the state has carried out administrative tasks and exercised political control in urban areas largely through the workplace or “work unit” (*danwei*; Perry and Lü 1997). Nonetheless, city governments have always maintained the RCs as their alley-level liaisons, and their importance to the state has arguably increased over time, at least in certain respects. Even at its peak, the *dantai* only incorporated a portion of the urban population, and in recent years this has shrunk as state firms lay off workers and migrants stream in from the countryside. Although work units in politically important sectors remain closely overseen by the state, the trend is to build up *government* capacity instead.

As the primary purpose of the RCs is to facilitate governance, the rising challenges facing cities led them to devote increasing attention and resources to them over the past two decades. 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*). While this project borrows from an imported, public-relations-friendly discourse of community development, it is driven by a highly statist vision centered around government-dominated organizations, particularly the RCs

(now often relabeled “Community Residents’ Committees.”) As with so many CCP projects, the redoubled focus on the RCs has both a state-security motivation as well as a service-delivery motivation. It aims to maintain oversight but also to establish a better administrative “platform” from which to facilitate the provision of more sophisticated forms of welfare.

The physical, built environment of residential neighborhoods has been undergoing far-reaching transformation in the past 15 years. Older neighborhoods of often dilapidated one- or two-story homes have been demolished and rebuilt at great speed in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities. At the same time, residential construction has shifted to the creation of new estates of privately owned condominiums run by professional property management companies (Davis 2003; Wang and Murie 1999; Zhou and Logan 1996).

All this has affected the RCs. The development of the organizational “software” of the committees lags considerably behind the pace of the “hardware” of housing construction. It can take several years for city and district governments to build new RCs (and in some cases on city peripheries, whole new Street Offices to oversee them.) Even after staff are hired, newly built organizations generally must start from scratch in trying to recreate the subtle web of interpersonal ties that underpin their operations in the older neighborhoods. The staff, at least initially are strangers to their constituents. Moreover, in modern neighborhoods residents have fewer reasons to seek them out. Maintenance, security, and most fees are handled by the property management company. The RCs have less to offer by way of small favors and conveniences, as more and more needs are met by market-based providers.

If property management companies take away some of the RC’s function as the neighborhood’s all-purpose go-to office, a new type of organization has the potential to undercut its status as “representative” body. Authorized under national policies issued in 1994 and 2003, homeowners’ organizations (*yezhu weiyuanhui*, YWH) are forming in a growing number of new, privately owned housing developments. Perhaps 6,000 to 7,000 of them existed as of 2004.<sup>10</sup> These groups vary widely, from those that are dominated by developers to a minority that are democratically elected by owners themselves. The national guidelines on YWH assert the primacy of the RC over the homeowners’ groups. In practice, relations between the two bodies range from cooperative in some cases to conflictual in others. It is as yet unclear just what degree of autonomy the government will ultimately permit for the YWH and how compatible these “two centers” of power in the neighborhood will be. At a minimum, in those instances where they genuinely represent the residents, they complicate the neighborhood’s administrative milieu (Read 2003b, 2007).

Given these three sets of evolving circumstances, how are the RCs themselves changing? One reform that has *not* yet taken place is democratization – at least, not in any substantial way as of the 2003 elections. 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 by the Street Office and the Residents’ Committee themselves on the basis of their supportiveness. Candidates are for the most part determined in advance by the Street Office, sometimes in consultation with the RC incumbents. 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.

A number of cities have experimented with electoral procedures by relaxing one or more of the above constraints in some cases, although not so far as to render the elections free and fair by democratic standards. In Beijing’s 2003 round of RC elections, only a small fraction of neighborhoods (less than 10 percent) held votes where balloting was not limited just to “residents’ representatives.” In only 11 neighborhoods were all adult residents eligible to vote. These elections involved very little competition: only 9.5 percent of candidates failed to be elected.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of democratization, RC reforms have focused on streamlining the system and recruiting better-credentialed and younger staff. Between 2000 and 2003 alone, the total number of committees in the eight districts at the heart of Beijing was reduced by more than half, from 3,885 to 1,822. This entailed merging many smaller RCs and sending home some of the older staff members. The changes were part of an ongoing process of reform stretching back at least to the early 1990s.

This state-led revitalization of the RCs has made the positions more remunerative and 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. 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.

RC staff are, now as always, far more likely to be female than male.<sup>12</sup> The average employee in Beijing is a woman with a high school education – though significant numbers of people with tertiary degrees now serve. Unlike the stereotypical bound-footed old lady of yesteryear, the average staff member is in her mid forties. Nearly 48 percent of RC staff are Communist Party members, an *increase* from 40 percent in 2000. This reflects diligent efforts by the authorities to maintain the Party committees associated with each RC, to ensure that at least one of the leaders of each RC is a Party member, and generally to keep this institution under Party as well as Street Office supervision.<sup>13</sup>



The nature of the committees' work has evolved over 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 new order. In the Cultural Revolution, they 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, when urban families were required to send many of their children out into the countryside to learn from the peasants, the RCs had to check that they were not sneaking back to their parents' homes. 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 discussed 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 has been greatly augmented.

### RCs and Their Constituents

What is the basic nature of constituents' relations with their RCs? Do not residents live in fear of this organization which, after all, represents the eyes and ears of the state? As we will see, residents' attitudes toward the RCs vary widely. To begin with, it should be pointed out that, for most people, the RCs hardly inspire fear. 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.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the work unit, the RC has no control over people's salaries or their access to housing. Residents can opt not to cooperate with it. Indeed, most of the time they can ignore it entirely if they choose.

As noted earlier, in order to carry out their duties efficiently and smoothly, RCs try to cultivate personal contact and familiarity with their constituents. The Beijing Law and Community Survey provides figures indicating what proportion of Beijing residents have ever approached the staff of their RC for various purposes, like paying fees (26 percent), taking care of documents (29 percent), and receiving low-cost goods or services (48 percent). 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. Close to two-thirds indicated that they had sought out the RC for at least one of these reasons. Modest though some of these services are, the neighborhood committees are institutions that considerable numbers of Beijing residents at least occasionally turn to for assistance of one kind or another.

Table 14.2 provides figures on participation in the RCs' social and voluntary activities. 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. More time-consuming or committed forms of participation attract around 10 percent of the sample, disproportionately women and retirees. Neighborhoods vary in terms of the amount of RC-related volunteer activity they generate, as one would expect. In new neighborhoods where committees are just being developed, there is relatively little such activity, while RCs are more active in this respect in older neighborhoods.

The more casual forms of interaction that constituents have with their RCs, together with the various activities of a highly-involved minority of residents, add up to a substantial amount of face-to-face contact between RCs and those

**Table 14.2** Participation in RC-sponsored activities

	All respondents (%)	Women (%)	Retirees (%)	Party members (%)
<i>Percent in category of respondent who:</i>				
Contribute regularly to RC charity drives	35.4	36.9	49.7	37.5
Participate in RC social events	10.7	11.9	18.7	18.4
Participate in RC patrols	6.8	9.5	17.5	8.8
Hold a neighborhood volunteer post	4.9	7.0	12.9	5.7
<i>Of those who:</i>				
Contribute regularly to RC charity drives	54.1	54.1	45.6	25.9
Participate in RC social events	57.9	57.9	57.0	42.1
Participate in RC patrols	72.6	72.6	83.6	31.5
Hold a neighborhood volunteer post	75.0	75.0	86.5	28.8

Source: Beijing Law and Community Survey, 2001.

they administer. Figure 14.1 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. 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.

What do ordinary citizens think of the RCs? Figure 14.2 offers several ways of answering this. More than 60 percent of the respondents indicated they were at least "fairly satisfied" with their RCs; another 16 percent were neutral. But would people prefer not to have the committees at all? This was asked indirectly through a question measuring perceptions of the RC's dispensability. 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. It is worth noting that in Taiwan, as well, most urban residents approve of their counterpart to the RCs; 74 percent said in a 2004 survey that they would like the *lizhang* system kept, while only 19 percent wished it to be abolished.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this broad-based feeling that the RC is generally satisfactory and useful should not be taken as implying deep trust in this institution. Only

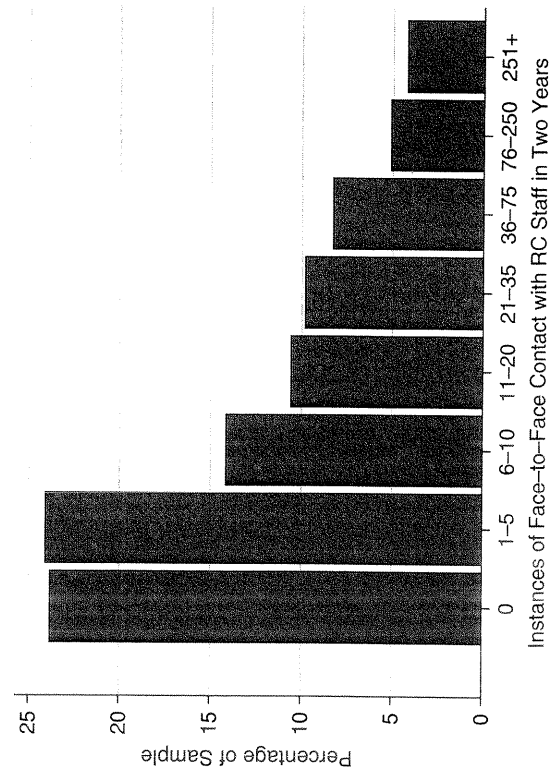


Figure 14.1 Frequency of Beijing citizens' contact with their RC staff

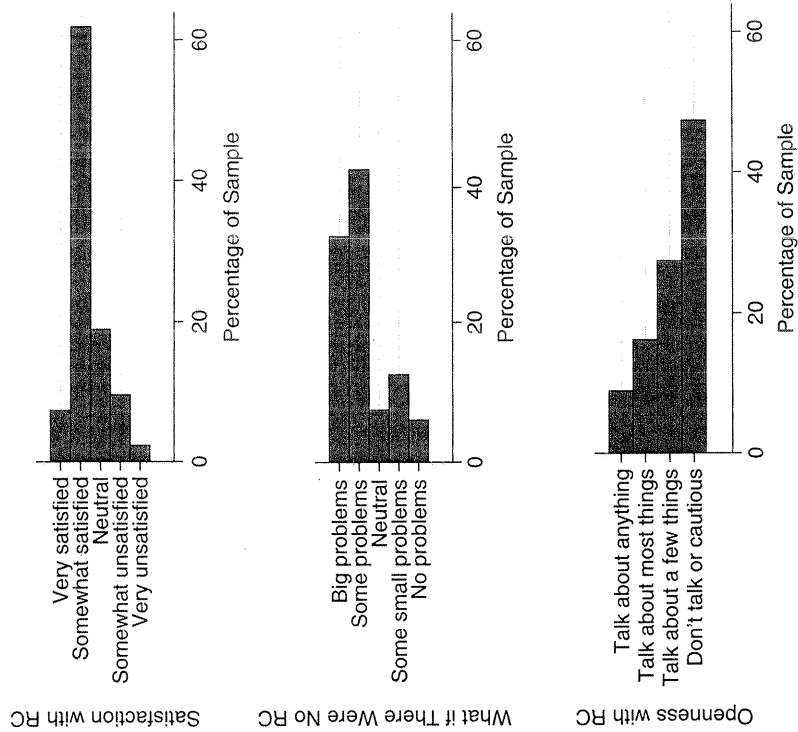


Figure 14.2 Three measures of Beijing citizens' views on the RCs

about a quarter of our respondents selected one of two "trusting" answer categories in our question designed to measure how comfortable people are talking to the members of their RC.

Survey results, taken by themselves, would not be entirely convincing. We might wonder, for instance, whether respondents felt 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. One factor underlying residents' attitudes seems to be fear of the burgeoning rural migrant population, whom urbanites tend to view with suspicion (Solinger 1999).

### Conclusions

This chapter has considered China's Residents' Committees not simply as a Chinese or a state-socialist phenomenon, but as a case of what we refer to as grassroots administrative engagement. The RCs are fundamentally different from autonomous organizations of civil society. Their state-managed nature is off-putting to some residents, who dislike the committee's surveillance and limited ability to represent their interests. Others appreciate the groups' keeping an eye on the neighborhood and its being available to provide various services and hear a wide range of complaints and requests. Still others enjoy participating as volunteers in RC social or service activities. The committees' links to the government, then, cut in more than one way. Many urbanites ignore this institution entirely; most have occasional interactions with it; and a relatively small fraction of the population is closely engaged. Public opinion toward the RCs is mixed, with a perhaps surprisingly large proportion expressing approval.

We have seen that grassroots engagement plays an important role in policing, governance, and policy implementation; indeed, from the state's perspective this is its principal *raison d'être*. 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 repress 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.

Returning to the broad theoretical paradigms under consideration in this volume, we argued at the outset that other state socialist systems (whether current or former) do not provide the most useful frame of reference. What about modernization theory? The evidence presented above is mixed. The kinds of networks that these local organizations involve are not easy to categorize as either "traditional" or "modern." As discussed, these institutions in some ways hark back to premodern systems of social control. Yet in the first half of the 20th century, whether in Taiwan, South Korea, or mainland China, similar techniques were employed by modernizing states to coopt and incorporate preexisting forms of community. As we have seen, residents' contacts with, and participation in, the RCs are largely voluntary in nature. Yet there are also traditional elements in that neighborhood leaders in China sometimes draw

on people's willingness to give respect to their elders. This is so even if, in other ways, a laid-off female Communist Party member fits no one's image of a "traditional elite." (Taiwan's *lizhang*, who are overwhelmingly male, older than Beijing's RC staff on average, and sometimes have the status of local landowners, clan leaders, or temple managers, admit to even more traditional characteristics.) Thus, perhaps applying a tradition/modernity lens to this institution is to generate a "misplaced polarity" (Gusfield 1967).

In fairness, however, it must be said that residential neighborhoods in cities like Beijing are undergoing change at a breathtaking pace, and this form of modernization is indeed relevant to the RC system. City residents themselves commonly speak of the coldness and anonymity of neighborhood relations in the new apartment complexes, compared to older neighborhoods they remember, perhaps with a bit of nostalgic imagination. Modernity, among other things, implies functional specialization, a broader scope of market-based relationships, and greater freedom of choice. Urbanites today are much more able to choose where they live than in the past. In the new apartment complexes, professional management companies play roles that once were the province of the RC or other government agencies. Private homeowners' groups (where they exist) provide an alternative channel through which residents raise demands and pursue their interests. These trends diminish some of the bases on which RCs maintain contact with their communities, even as they strive creatively to maintain other means of establishing rapport and develop still others.

This chapter has suggested that looking comparatively at ultra-local organizations in cities elsewhere in East Asia is perhaps the most useful way to put this aspect of urban China in context. Differences notwithstanding, China's governing apparatus shares certain generic features as well as historical roots with those of Taiwan and South Korea. Indeed, research on the "developmental state" would do well to go beyond its economic dimensions toward a more holistic understanding that would include urban governance. While growth was what called the world's attention to these superstar performers, a closer inspection reveals that the ability to conjure economic development was but one aspect of a constellation of features both of the state and its relation to society.

Parallel institutions elsewhere, like Taiwan's urban *lizhang* network and Korea's *long/ban* system, remind us that state-fostered local institutions do not necessarily wither away even in the context of the kind of dramatic regime transition that took place in those countries in the late 1980s and 1990s. The *lizhang* (though not the *longjang* and *banyang*) also show that democratically elected (as opposed to government-appointed) local representatives can fit snugly into a system of close state-society ties. In turn, the Chinese RCs suggest that even in the absence of electoral accountability, a significant portion of urban constituents may be positively disposed toward this type of state institution, even as others treat it coldly. In short, while there is no one "Asian model" of grassroots administrative engagement, we may well expect the

organizational structure of China's cities to continue to develop in ways that parallel other metropolises within the region rather than mimicking their North American or European counterparts.

## NOTES

- 1 Fieldwork in China, South Korea, and Taiwan upon which this chapter draws was sponsored by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship; a grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with China of the American Council of Learned Societies, a Graduate Student Small Grant from the Urban China Research Network, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and support from International Programs at the University of Iowa. None of these organizations is responsible for the findings.
- 2 In Chinese these organizations are known formally as *jumin weiyuanhui* or *shequ jumin weiyuanhui*, or *juweihui* for short.
- 3 These pre-conditions do not suffice to explain grassroots administrative engagement, but they help to show how some states are unable or unwilling to develop such institutions. Thus cases are rare or attenuated in the poorest and weakest of developing-world states, and in countries with a longstanding liberal tradition. Specifically on these historical roots, see Johnson 1982, p. 23; Kohli 1994, 2004 (c.f. Haggard, Kang, and Moon 1997); Amsden 1989, pp. 37, 63–4; Evans 1995, pp. 51, 55; and Wade 1990, pp. 228–31, 337–42.
- 5 See Lee 1984, p. 184, for a brief discussion of Choson dynasty (1392–1910) systems that organized households into units of five, and required subjects to carry identification tags.
- 6 Seo 2002, p. 2.
- 7 Figures on the *lizhang* are available from the Statistical Yearbook of the Ministry of the Interior, online at <http://www.moi.gov.tw/stat/>
- 8 Officials of the South Korean Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, in an interview on July 12, 2004, provided the figure of 57,993 *tong* in cities nationwide as of December 31, 2003.
- 9 The Taipei figures are derived from the city's Civil Affairs bureau website at <http://www.ca.taipei.gov.tw/civil/page.htm>. The Seoul figures stem from a chart provided by Suh Young Kwon of the city's Local Autonomy Assistance Division in an interview on July 13, 2004.
- 10 Shanghai is far ahead of other cities in terms of the number of officially recognized homeowners' groups. By the end of 2003, 4,756 homeowners committees had been established in Shanghai, at least an order of magnitude more than the figures for other cities. Shanghai is also distinct in allowing significant numbers of *juweihui* in formerly state-owned neighborhoods (*fangqifang*) in addition to commercial housing (*shanghuifang*). The numbers come from an interview with Shanghai housing official Xin Yiming, June 30, 2004.
- 11 Unpublished figures from the Beijing city government, on file with the author.
- 12 Unpublished figures from the Beijing city government, on file with the author. One reason for the disproportionately large number of women among RC staff

is that women often face layoffs or mandatory early retirement at younger ages than men. Apart from this, however, the highly gendered way in which RC service is conceived – it is widely seen as “women’s work” – makes a difference as well. Popular perceptions were shaped in the 1950s and 1960s, when RC programs were particularly aimed at integrating into the new socialist order women who were not affiliated with work units. Although precise figures are unavailable, a large majority of Seoul’s *bangjang* also seem to be women. In contrast, about 90 percent of the *lizhang* elected in Taipei in 2003 were men.

- 13 This is termed “community Party building.” The principal function of the Party committees that belong to the RCs is to maintain contact with Party members who, due to age and/or retirement, are no longer affiliated with the Party organization at their work unit.
- 14 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.
- 15 Data are from a Ministry of the Interior survey conducted by the second author.

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