

Revitalizing the State's Urban "Nerve Tips"*

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While observers of China have always paid attention to the "base-level" administrative institutions and mass organizations created by the Communist party-state, urban Residents' Committees (RCs; *jumin weiyuanhui*)¹ have received relatively little study in recent years.² Though the RCs remain pervasive in most areas of most cities and engage the energies of millions of activists and volunteers, this neglect is understandable. During the Mao era, Western writing on neighbourhood organizations emphasized their role in helping to police and administer the harsh political order that gripped the cities. In the 1980s and 1990s, the authorities have yielded much greater space to a private sphere in which law-abiding individuals are relatively free from intrusion. Instruments of state penetration such as the RCs have seemed less worthy of analysis. They also lack the requisite autonomy to qualify as part of an emergent civil society, and moreover their limited progress in serving as a focus for democratic participation earns them much less international attention than their rural equivalents, the Villagers' Committees. They may even seem worthy of derision rather than study; merely mentioning the term *juweihui* often brings an amused smile to people's faces, as it connotes ageing, officious busybodies poking into people's personal matters.

It is indeed true that the RCs intrude far less into ordinary people's

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1. The *juweihui* are sometimes referred to in English as "neighbourhood committees" or "street committees"; the latter term, however, renders them easily confused with street offices. I employ a literal translation in this article.

2. An important exception is Allen C. Choate, "Local governance in China, part II: an assessment of urban Residents Committees and municipal community development," Asia Foundation Working Paper, No. 10, November 1998. See also John P. Clark, "Conflict management outside the courtrooms of China," in Ronald J. Troyer, John P. Clark and Dean G. Rojek (eds.) *Social Control in the People's Republic of China* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989); Gordon White and Bob Benewick, *Local Government and Basic-Level Democracy in China: Towards Reform?* transcript of a research trip, March–April 1986, China Research Report, IDS (Brighton: University of Sussex, 1986); Michael R. Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to "the People"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 335–340; Robert Benewick, "Political institutionalization in government," and Gordon White, "Basic-level local government and economic reform in urban China," in Gordon White (ed.), *The Chinese State in the Era of Economic Reform: The Road to Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1991); and William R. Jankowiak, *Sex, Death and Hierarchy in a Chinese City: An Anthropological Account* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), as well as items cited below.

lives than they once did, and also that there are significant obstacles that hinder them from blossoming into models of town-hall democracy. Nevertheless, they continue to play a quietly powerful role in the political, social and economic life of many urban neighbourhoods. In some places, they have even acquired new significance in areas like the leasing of public property, the provision of many services, and the implementation of policies such as birth control among groups falling outside workplace-based systems of administration. Central leaders, officials of the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA), and municipal governments have, in the past two decades, made genuine efforts to rebuild and enliven the RCs. Meanwhile, the gradual privatization of housing, the growth of professional property management companies, and the advent of owners' associations have all complicated neighbourhood administration.

For observers of China and its politics, the interaction between urban government and citizens through the intermediary of neighbourhood organizations provides a window on serious analytical questions. RCs stand as a prominent example of how cities mobilize the services of ordinary people, recruiting them into quasi-governmental organizations and endowing them with certain powers and obligations. Do these state-mandated bodies in any way serve or represent the interests of the citizens living in urban areas? Are they even effective in helping the government administer and police the cities? Do these institutions help create community social ties, do they draw on existing solidarities or do they in fact thwart the building of community? What compels people to serve in RCs and are they appreciated or resented by their neighbours?

The purpose of this article is to lay out these theoretical questions and some partial and tentative answers to them, while also sketching out a description of RCs in the late 1990s. I draw upon interviews conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in the summer of 1998 and the autumn of 1999, together with MoCA publications, in particular the monthly journal *Urban Street Office and Residents Committee Report*.³ As with so many local institutions that manifest themselves throughout the country with local variations, it is difficult and hazardous to make generalizations about RCs, owing to their diversity from city to city and neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Still, it is possible to point out some broad trends.

Gradual Changes in Neighbourhood Organization

China's Residents' Committees are a network of some 119,000 organizations, each based within a specific urban neighbourhood, usually comprising three to seven members, and led by the RC director.⁴ The law stipulates that each committee cover an area including 100 to 700

3. The journal's current title in Chinese is *Chengshi jie ju tongxun (CSJTX)*. Its first three volumes (1991–93) were published as *Zhongguo jiedao gongzuo (China Street Work)*.

4. As of the end of 1998, there were 119,042 RCs comprising 508,363 members nation-wide, according to figures collected by the MoCA.

households, but their jurisdictions can be larger, sometimes covering well over 1,000 homes. The RC generally heads a set of subordinate organizations which may include residents' small groups, specialized sub-committees, and individual activists and volunteers. The latter category are often more immediately visible than the committee members themselves; unfamiliar visitors to neighbourhoods are likely to come upon members of the volunteer security patrols, wearing their distinctive red arm-bands. RCs commonly maintain propaganda posters and chalkboards announcing policies, activities or services. Committee members work several hours each morning and afternoon out of an office in the neighbourhood. Ranging from cramped shacks to spacious suites, RC offices feature walls bedecked with organizational charts, demographic figures, slogans and work guidelines. The office telephone sometimes doubles as neighbourhood payphone.

The committees are not considered part of the government; the RCs are defined by law as "base-level autonomous organizations of the masses." Still, they constitute an extension of the municipal government's administrative apparatus; stock phrases in official discourse refer to them as the city's "nerve tips" or "foundation stones." Large Chinese cities contain three levels of formal administration: the city government (*shi zhengfu*), the district government (*qu zhengfu*) and the street office (*jiedao ban-shichu*). For example, as of 1997 Beijing and its suburbs comprised ten districts, subdivided into 118 street offices, which in turn oversaw 5,026 RCs.⁵ The street offices, the lowest level in the urban hierarchy to be staffed with state cadres, also maintain close ties to the local police stations (*paichusuo*) in administering their jurisdictions, as do the RCs themselves.

The RC's basic purpose is to marshal the energies of ordinary citizens to facilitate government administrative and policing tasks, as well as providing a range of everyday services. In so doing it mobilizes people into standardized patterns of organization and serves as their liaison with government, communicating official policies and announcements to them, selectively responding to and communicating to higher levels their special needs, grievances or problems, and collecting a wide range of information about them.⁶ It thus performs functions that in some ways parallel those of the work unit (*gongzuo danwei*). As researchers have

5. *Beijing Statistical Yearbook 1998* (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1998), p. 39. These figures exclude the smaller cities within the eight counties that lie inside the greater Beijing administrative region.

6. The RCs' official duties are as follows: "1) to publicize the Constitution, laws, statutes and state policies; to uphold the lawful rights of residents; to teach residents to fulfil their lawful obligations and protect public property; to carry out many forms of activities in promoting socialist spiritual civilization; 2) to manage public affairs and projects of public benefit for residents of the neighbourhood; 3) to mediate civil disputes; 4) to assist in maintaining social order; 5) to assist the People's Government and its agencies in conducting work pertaining to residents' interest in public sanitation, birth control, welfare, youth education, and so forth; 6) to express residents' opinions, requests and suggestions to the People's Government and its agencies." *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo fagui huibian 1989 nian 1 yue-12 yue* (*Compiled Statutes of the People's Republic of China, January-December 1989*) (Beijing: Zhongguo fazhi chubanshe, 1990), p. 140.

documented, the political-administrative nexus of the workplace has traditionally been much more important for urban Chinese employed in state or collective units than its neighbourhood counterpart.⁷ This was because urbanites typically depended on the workplace for a salary, housing and benefits, while government relied heavily on the workplace to administer urban affairs. Nevertheless, just as in the 1950s, the authorities believe that proper management of the cities requires neighbourhood-based administration and organization in order to connect with population groups not encompassed by work units. In the early 1950s Peng Zhen – an architect and lifelong promoter of the Party's grassroots organizations – predicted that with industrialization and the transition to socialism, "the number of neighbourhood residents outside the worker's class will diminish day by day," thus gradually attenuating the need for local levels of municipal governance.⁸ But rural-to-urban migration and extensive lay-offs from public sector enterprises have meant that more and more people living in the cities fall outside the *danwei's* reach. For a government committed to enforcing birth-control policies, maintaining household registration and suppressing potential challenges from organizations such as *falungong*, strengthening neighbourhood-based administration has become all the more vital.

This article will not give a full overview of the history of the RCs, but will discuss some of the general ways they appear to have evolved over the years. Several studies by Western scholars examined Mao-era neighbourhood organizations in China's cities, providing insight into the early years of this institution.⁹ Neighbourhood-based organization in the People's Republic began immediately after the communist takeover with a set of ad hoc committees that attempted to cope with the wartime chaos. Residents themselves organized some of these committees, on the model

7. See the discussion in Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 239–246. On work units, see Xiaobo Lü and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Danwei: The Changing Chinese Workplace in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997). Work units that own large housing blocks often have their own residence-based organizations. Known as "family members committees" (*jiashu weiyuanhui*) these constitute about one-sixth of all RCs. See also Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 59–61.

8. "Chengshi ying jianli jiedao banshichu he jumin weiyuanhui" ("Cities should create street offices and Residents' Committees"), *Peng Zhen wenxuan (1941–1990) (Selected Works of Peng Zhen)* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1991), p. 241.

9. The most important of these are found in Franz Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); James R. Townsend, *Political Participation in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Ezra F. Vogel, "Preserving order in the cities," in John Wilson Lewis, (ed.) *The City in Communist China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971); and Whyte and Parish, *Urban Life*. I have also drawn on references in A. Doak Barnett, *Communist China: The Early Years, 1949–1955* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1964); John Gardner, "The *wu-fan* campaign in Shanghai," in A. Doak Barnett (ed.), *Chinese Communist Politics in Action* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969); Kenneth Lieberthal, *Revolution and Tradition in Tientsin, 1949–1952* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Ezra F. Vogel, *Canton Under Communism: Programs and Politics in a Provincial Capital, 1949–1968* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); and Lynn T. White, "Shanghai's polity in the Cultural Revolution," in Lewis, *The City in Communist China*; as well as others cited in the text.

of pre-communist neighbourhood organizations, while others were established by the early military governments.¹⁰ In the years that followed, the government undertook to unify and standardize what was initially a haphazard assortment of local organizations. A set of regulations issued on the last day of 1954 formally established the RC under law.

It is frequently observed that RCs bear some affinity to pre-communist systems of local control such as the *baojia*, established in the countryside during the dynastic era and re-established by the KMT and by the Japanese occupiers.¹¹ Schurmann writes that “the experience of Tianjin and Shanghai with the *baojia* probably facilitated the organization of the residents’ committees.”¹² Nevertheless, he and other observers are generally more impressed with the communists’ innovation than their debt to legacies of prior organizational forms.¹³ The new authorities saw the committees not merely as a tool for policing but also as a means to incorporate and mobilize elements of the population they could not as effectively reach through other mass organizations, particularly housewives, the unemployed and the self-employed.¹⁴ The RCs expended considerable effort on such programmes as literacy campaigns, sanitation and dispute resolution.

Although RCs were never as central to urban administration as were work units, observers generally judged them to be powerful – and unpopular – extensions of state authority, though their nature and efficacy clearly varied from place to place. Some committee members were more effective than others in skills like mediation; many were illiterate; and a relatively small percentage of residents chose to participate wholeheartedly in the meetings and activities.¹⁵ Neighbourhood work was sharply if temporarily disrupted during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, when rebellious residents established “revolutionary” versions of both street offices and RCs.¹⁶ Nevertheless, these local deputies wielded considerable power within their area of jurisdiction. Their role as enforcers of the household registration system, collaborators with the police and promoters of various political campaigns, as well as dispensers of ration coupons, housing and jobs in street-level factories and work-

10. Townsend, *Political Participation*, pp. 158–59.

11. Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915–1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971), pp. 118–19; Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, pp. 368–370. On the *baojia*, see Kung-chuan Hsiao, *Rural China: Imperial Control in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967)

12. Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, p. 376.

13. *Ibid.* pp. 376–380; Stanley Lubman, “Mao and mediation: politics and dispute resolution in Communist China,” *California Law Review*, Vol. 55, No. 5 (November 1967), p. 1358.

14. Townsend, *Political Participation*, p. 158.

15. Lubman, “Mao and mediation,” p. 1349; Janet Weitzner Salaff, “Urban residential committees in the wake of the Cultural Revolution,” in Lewis, *The City in Communist China* p. 294; Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, p. 376.

16. Salaff, “Urban residential committees,” pp. 298–306; *Haidian qu jiedao gongzuo yanjiu (Studies of Street Work in Haidian District)* (Beijing: Haidian District Government, 1991), pp. 144–45.

shops, gave them substantial clout.¹⁷ Committee activists monitored and even led denunciations of criminals and political enemies. Published anecdotes highlighted the authority they could wield as state agents.¹⁸ Whyte and Parish concluded on the basis of interviews with 133 émigrés that far from serving as "buffers between the individual and the larger political system," the RCs "were at best transparent entities between the individual and the state above."¹⁹ They also reported that "about a quarter of our informants saw their residents' committee chiefs as helpful and friendly, another quarter saw them neutrally, and about half saw them as nasty and meddling," just as Schurmann found that "refugees generally report on the unpopularity of the residents committees."²⁰

Though information about the RC system of the Mao era is highly fragmentary, published sources and the cities' relative openness make it possible to learn much more about its recent years. How has this institution changed over time? Is it effective at any of its tasks or a mere ornament? Is it welcomed or disliked by city dwellers? Interviews with and documents written by MoCA officials, visits to neighbourhoods, and conversations with ordinary urbanites suggest complicated answers to these questions. During the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, national and municipal agencies made real efforts to reform and rebuild the committees. Officials saw many of the RCs as sclerotic, overly authoritarian, underfunded and isolated from their communities. They sought to turn this around by recruiting new staff, finding new sources of revenue and encouraging a more participatory style (under the slogan "self-administration, self-education and self-service") while maintaining the RCs' basic role as official mediating bodies between government and citizenry. This programme has achieved real results. Moreover, committees in prosperous areas have benefited from local economic growth, which provides a key source of revenue; on top of this, many city governments themselves have markedly increased funding for the committees. Meanwhile, the RCs' service functions have proliferated, while on the policing and political side they have shed some of their more intrusive practices. In this way, committees that are active in responding to their constituents' everyday problems and concerns seem frequently to win tacit approval or even active support, at least among certain segments of the relatively privileged, permanent urban population.

The above points to a notable (if quiet and gradual) evolution in the character and workings of the committees. At the same time, the RCs exhibit great unevenness from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and city

17. Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, p. 376; Lubman, "Mao and mediation," p. 1348; Townsend, *Political Participation*, p. 162; Vogel, "Preserving order," p. 87; Whyte and Parish, *Urban Life*, pp. 284–87.

18. "My neighborhood," in B. Michael Frolic, *Mao's People: Sixteen Portraits of Life in Revolutionary China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 224–241; Fox Butterfield, *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea*, revised edition (New York: Times Books, 1990), pp. 324–28.

19. Whyte and Parish, *Urban Life*, pp. 289–290.

20. *Ibid.* p. 285; Schurmann, *Ideology and Organization*, p. 377.

to city, with quite a few suffering from “paralysis”; some newly urbanized areas lack them altogether. Their close relationship with government and elaborate set of responsibilities make them effective at accomplishing certain tasks but ill-suited as vehicles for more spontaneous and autonomous grassroots participation, though some MoCA officials advocate this. Plenty of urbanites, particularly youth, are indifferent or hostile toward the committees; some are irritated by their persistent collecting of fees, and others are simply cynical towards government-backed institutions of all sorts. With increasing population mobility and housing renovation breaking apart the kind of face-to-face relationships upon which the committees rely for much of their work, it appears to be an open question how well they will perform both government tasks and constituent services in the future.

In the 1980s, the central government began an attempt to revitalize neighbourhood organization, formally expressed in the Residents’ Committee Organization Law passed on 26 December 1989. An important impetus behind this move was to rebuild grassroots organization in response to increasing disorder in the cities.²¹ Just as in earlier decades, the state sees such organization in part as a tool to use in combating crime, regulating country folk who venture into the cities and maintaining political stability.

Responding to this initiative, localities all over China have, in varying degrees, made efforts to replace ageing RC staff with people who are younger and better-educated, to provide them with more training, and to increase their stipends and benefits. While prior to the reforms, RC directors often served indefinitely and some occupied their posts for decades, since 1990 many cities have implemented three-year election cycles, at the end of which new staff may be brought into office. Street offices have laboured to recruit retired cadres who possess education and organizational experience to take the place of the less-educated homemakers who typically ran the committees in their early decades. Beijing, for instance, had by the end of 1997 lowered the average age of its 22,089 committee members to under 54, down from over 60 in the 1980s.²² By the same year, staffing changes in the greater Shanghai area had ensured that 95 per cent of RC staff had at least a middle-school education.²³ In addition to recruiting retirees, cities have hired substantial numbers of younger people to work in the RCs, tapping those in their 30s and 40s who have left the public-sector work force due to lay-offs or other reasons and offering them jobs close to home.

These younger recruits, and retirees as well, are encouraged to serve in

21. Peng Zhen saw the post-Cultural Revolution rebuilding of the RCs as crucial to improving security work in the cities. See his “Zai wu da chengshi zhian zuotan hui shang de jianghua” (“Speech at a conference on public security in five big cities”) and “Xin shiqi de zhengfa gongzuo” (“Political-legal work in the new era”), in *Peng Zhen wenxuan*, especially pp. 411–12 and 430–31.

22. Interview, Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau, 26 August 1998; “Beijing shi juweihui di-san ci huanjie xuanju de zuofa ji tedian” (“Methods and characteristics of the third Residents Committee election cycle in Beijing”), *CSJTX*, Vol. 7, No. 9 (1997), p. 11.

23. Interview, Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 30 July 1998.

the neighbourhood through higher stipends and salaries. Service in the RC, which was once done on an entirely voluntary basis or compensated by small stipends only, has in some cities become professionalized. Shanghai, for instance, pays retirees around 300 *yuan* per month (on top of their pensions) for service in the committees, while employing a smaller number of younger, full-time staff for an average of 700 to 800 *yuan*.²⁴ Exact arrangements vary from place to place, and many poorer inland cities pay their neighbourhood workers far less.

The compensation received by staff depends in part on the condition of the area's micro-economy. RCs derive their operating funds not merely from the city government budget, but also from fees collected from households and local businesses, and earnings from services and enterprises controlled by the committees themselves. In the same way as other forms of local authority throughout China, RCs have embraced the market with gusto.²⁵ The committees (and government street offices as well) have a long history of sponsoring small-scale workshops and businesses designed to create employment for "job-awaiting" youth, the disabled and others. The era of economic reform has, however, brought many of the committees tremendous opportunities to benefit, even as those in economically depressed areas continue to languish. Their current economic activity covers a wide variety of practices. RCs offer an array of low-cost services to residents, from which they raise revenue. These range from serving as brokers for nannies and handymen to selling products like cockroach poison. They often rent out property to which they have *de facto* rights, and serve as sponsors and landlords for entrepreneurs who establish shops in the area, whether they be itinerant tailors mending torn clothing, or locals purveying cigarettes in a tiny convenience store. Companies selling medical and household products have avidly employed the RCs as convenient marketing channels. The committees also tap residents and local businesses for fees and contributions.

In the early and mid-1990s, the MoCA vigorously encouraged the RCs to build, and draw revenue from, the local economy. Its publications pointed out many examples of areas that had nourished and built up fledgling enterprises in order to fund more and better services for the population; conversely, where RCs are torpid and unable to recruit staff and get things done, this was attributed to failure to develop the local economy.²⁶ Different localities have developed different approaches to

24. *Ibid.*

25. For examples of RCs interacting with private enterprise, see David L. Wank, "Bureaucratic patronage and private business: changing networks of power in urban China," and Ole Bruun, "Political hierarchy and private entrepreneurship in a Chinese neighbourhood," in Andrew G. Walder (ed.) *The Waning of the Communist State: Economic Origins of Political Decline in China and Hungary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

26. See, for example, the discussion in "Minzhengbu Ma Xueli chuzhang zai quanguo jiedao gongzuo weiyuanhui, 1994 nian changweihui bimushi shang de jianghua" ("Talk by Director Ma Xueli of the Ministry of Civil Affairs at the closing ceremony of the 1994 meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Committee on Street Work"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 4, No. 8 (1994), pp. 2–4, and Hunan Province Civil Affairs Department, "Dali fazhan juban jingji

local entrepreneurship, however. While some cities such as Guangzhou have given free rein to the RCs' business dealings, Beijing and Shanghai have recently made efforts to curtail their economic activity, recognizing that flagrantly grubbing for money invites resentment towards the committees and distracts them from other duties.²⁷

The committees' administrative and service functions have also proliferated over the years. The list of official responsibilities written into law²⁸ hardly begins to describe the diverse range of activities that RC members engage in. Neighbourhood work has always had a catch-all quality to it; residents come to the committees' doorsteps with any kind of trouble, from septic tank overflows to burned-out streetlights. But in recent years, RCs (like the street offices that supervise them) have been charged with a multitude of duties passed on by the many branches of city government. Complaints about municipal governments saddling the RCs with too much work abound,²⁹ despite appeals by national-level officials like Yan Mingfu of the MoCA.³⁰ The RCs are frequently given "mandatory quotas" (*yingxing tanpai*) by higher authorities – requiring them to sell savings bonds, change bicycle licence plates, collect flood-prevention funds and subscribe to newspapers, among other things.³¹ First on a list by two Liaoning officials of the committees' most serious problems was that of too much miscellaneous work, "like selling lottery tickets, delivering mail and newspapers, surveying bicycles and so forth."³² Today's RC staff are often responsible for such chores as carrying out surveys of the population and many other forms of paper-work; collecting fees for everything from water to cable television; checking on the tidiness of the street and the condition of its sign posts; handling fire prevention and mice eradication. In addition to such assigned duties, they carry out their own initiatives, like providing rec-

footnote continued

quanmian tuijin juweihui jianshe" ("Strongly develop the neighbourhood economy; comprehensively build the Residents' Committees") *CSJITX*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (1994), pp. 6–11.

27. Interviews with Shanghai and Beijing Civil Affairs Bureaus, 30 July and 26 August 1998.

28. See n. 7.

29. See, for example, Qi Zuowei, "Zai shichang jingji tiaojian xia gaige juweihui gongzuo guanli tizhi de sikao" ("Thoughts on reforming the administrative system for Residents Committee work within the conditions of the market economy"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 7, No. 10 (1997), p. 3; Ministry of Civil Affairs and Sichuan Province Civil Affairs Department, "Guanyu Sichuan sheng juweihui jianshe zhuangkuang de diaocha baogao" ("Report on a survey of the condition of Residents Committees in Sichuan province"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (1995), p. 1.

30. "Minzhengbu fubuzhang Yan Mingfu zai Jilin shi juweihui gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua" ("Talk by Ministry of Civil Affairs Vice-Minister Yan Mingfu at a meeting on Residents Committee work in Jilin") *CSJITX*, Vol. 5, No. 9 (1995), p. 4.

31. Wang Jinhua and Dai Aijiao, "Guanyu Suzhou, Wuxi, Shanghai juban jingji fazhan zhuangkuang de diaocha" ("A survey of the condition of neighbourhood economic development in Suzhou, Wuxi and Shanghai"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1994), pp. 16–17; Ministry of Civil Affairs and Fujian Province Civil Affairs Department, "Fujian sheng chengshi juweihui jianshe qingkuang diaocha" ("A survey of the condition of urban Residents Committees in Fujian province"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 5, No. 8 (1995), p. 22.

32. Ji Lijia and Liu Guicheng, "Liaoning sheng juweihui jianshe cunzai de wenti ji gaijin de cuoshi" ("Existing problems in the building of Residents Committees in Liaoning province, and measures for improvement"), *CSJITX*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1994), p. 8.

recreation rooms and organizing singing and dancing groups for the elderly, and summer courses in sciences, crafts and other topics for children. Not all committees are equally diligent, of course, and work shifts in the committee offices can sometimes appear quite sedate. Still, the multiplicity of duties and the need to go door-to-door contacting residents can make RC service tiring enough for street offices to have difficulty recruiting new staff.³³

Between State and Community

From my perspective, as suggested in the introduction, the interesting analytical issues raised by the RCs concern their role as intermediaries between government agencies and individual households. This section sets out these issues, together with observations from my research to date.

One basic question is how urban citizens look upon and interact with the RCs; for instance, are they still widely perceived as "nasty and meddling," if that is indeed how they once tended to be seen? Clearly, Mao-era practices – political campaigns, struggle sessions, late-night spot checks of household registry – once earned them the enmity of many residents. Even though the RCs have long since dropped their most intrusive behaviour, they remain responsible for assisting government and the police in carrying out a number of monitoring and enforcement functions. They still keep birth-control records on women of child-bearing age and watch for unauthorized pregnancies, in addition to compiling other types of information about residents, from military service to mental illness. They see to it that residents follow local regulations on fireworks and the keeping of dogs, rabbits and chickens; they help the police keep an eye on known criminals and dissidents, inquire about visitors, and try to enforce policies towards rural migrants.

One might expect that even this relatively toned-down administrative role would grate on those who are subject to their attentions. This is certainly true for many people, but interviews suggest that the relationship between committees and residents is much more complicated than that.³⁴ A majority of interviewees had at least a mildly favourable impression of their RC, and spoke of the positive services that it performed – things like helping people get their children into day-care, taking care of burdensome paperwork, and keeping a lookout for thieves. Not all informants were pleased with their committees; quite a few were simply indifferent, some disdainful. The interviews were moreover limited to Beijing and Shanghai, whose RCs are relatively well-funded and may be atypical in other respects as well. Predictably, the RCs' reputation for officiousness or self-important do-gooding makes them the butt of a

33. For instance, Wang Muqing, "Hangzhou shi jumin weiyuanhui jianshe diaocha baogao" ("Report on a survey of the development of Residents Committees in Hangzhou"), *CSJ/TX*, Vol. 7, No. 8 (1997), p. 27.

34. In the summer of 1998 I spoke to 54 ordinary citizens one-on-one in private to try to get a candid sense of their impressions of the RCs, in addition to interviewing government officials, academics and some RC members themselves.

certain amount of humour.³⁵ But curiously, among the minority of interviewees who were dissatisfied, many wished that committee members were *more* active and involved with the area, not less so. Some informants even expressed nostalgia for the Mao era, when, they felt, RCs really kept things shipshape.

The women who serve in the RCs are, after all, neighbours to those who live in the area.³⁶ Their precise relationship with other residents depends heavily on their individual personalities, as well as their approach to RC work and personal motives for doing it. The rising stipends and semi-professionalization of the committees indicate that members serve partly to supplement their incomes. Still, there are other motivations as well, ranging from altruistic ones (contributing to society) to the more self-regarding (having a way to keep busy while retired or unemployed; acquiring petty authority and a sense of importance). Interviewees sometimes complained about RC members who earned residents' dislike because of laziness, greed, or over-enthusiasm in enforcing rules and vying for government prizes. In other cases, their close acquaintance with residents, willingness to bend official policies and provision of helpful services made for good relations with their communities.

Attitudes vary significantly among different sections of the population. It is immediately evident that RCs tend to have closest ties with retirees, who are much more likely to have the time and the taste for participating in neighbourhood-watch patrols and social activities. Younger residents and those whose jobs keep them busily occupied outside the area are more likely to ignore the committees entirely or look upon them with contempt. Couples with children sometimes appreciate their services, such as providing hot lunches. Migrants may establish patron-client relations with RCs who introduce them to jobs and help them with paperwork while also enforcing their compliance with state policies or profiting from their work.³⁷ Situational factors cut across such demographic generalizations: for instance, residents with cars may appreciate getting newly paved parking spaces (for which the RC collects fees), even as others resent losing part of their garden.

As a quasi-official organization connecting state and society, a key part of the RC's purpose is to maintain a network of personal relationships between the government bureaucracy and its constituents. In this regard they are akin to Western institutions like welfare workers and parole officers (both of whose jobs are included in RC responsibilities.) Individual committee members take responsibility for a specific area of work, such as security, birth control or mediation. For them to be effective at

35. People sometimes teasingly call them the "small-footed detective squads" (*xiaojiao zhenji dui*) – a reference to the bound feet of elderly women raised before the revolution.

36. Some 90% of RC staff nation-wide are women, according to MoCA estimates. Most are residents of the neighbourhoods they work in, although Street Offices sometimes recruit staff from outside the immediate area.

37. The relatively privileged permanent residents of the cities generally applaud the RCs' efforts to keep a handle on the activities of migrants, whom they tend to distrust. This, however, is complicated by the fact that RCs are sometimes criticized for bringing *more* migrants into the neighbourhood to work in businesses under the committees' sponsorship.

any of their tasks – whether enforcing rules or providing services – it helps to have thorough acquaintance and good relations with those they administer and serve. Just how effective they are in various capacities is a topic for future research, that bears on general questions of how social networks or “social capital” contributes to, or detracts from, governance and development.³⁸ Clearly there are limits to what even the most active RCs can achieve, and one cannot of course take at face value official claims about their accomplishments in finding jobs for laid-off workers or preventing crime.

Still, the organizations clearly make significant contributions both to government administration efforts and to neighbourhood well-being, perhaps explaining the investments cities have made in them over the past decade. For example, interviews suggest that the RCs are more effective at dispute resolution than a sceptical observer might initially imagine.³⁹ A number of interviewees said that their mediation genuinely helps resolve some of the day-to-day frictions between households over matters like shared space and public utilities. In some cases simply having an “aunt” (*lao dama*) as a third party to go to, one with delegated government authority and perhaps some personal status on account of seniority, provides a way for disputants to back down without losing too much face. While the family planning policy is handled through multiple channels, including work units, city officials said that the RCs continue to play an important role in enforcing birth control compliance, particularly among the migrant population. As caseworkers who are familiar with the specific needs of households within their jurisdiction, the RCs receive credit for helping social welfare agencies to identify and assist some of the neediest residents, particularly those who lack family or work-unit support.⁴⁰

The fact that RCs depend to such a great extent on personal networks and face-to-face interaction raises questions about how their work varies in different areas, and how they are affected by trends in urban housing. The committees have historically been most strongly established in older neighbourhoods, where the Communist Party strove hardest to build an organizational foothold among those not part of the industrial workforce. The frequent interaction and close familiarity among residents in such areas, with their complex alleyways, public bathrooms and cramped, one- or two-storey housing, meant that committee members came into close contact with their constituents. The widespread development of newer neighbourhoods built around high-rise apartment buildings, the growth of a market for the leasing and sub-leasing of apartments, and technologies such as air conditioning and television keeping people inside their homes

38. See Michael Woolcock, “Social capital and economic development: toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework,” *Theory and Society*, No. 27 (2008), pp. 151–208; Peter Evans, “Government action, social capital and development: reviewing the evidence on synergy,” *World Development*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (June 1996), pp. 1119–32; and Robert D. Putnam with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

39. For an earlier account, see Clark, “Conflict management.”

40. Choate, “Local governance in China, part II,” elaborates on the RCs’ significance in the provision of social services.

more, have reduced this contact.⁴¹ Moreover, some newly built developments on urban peripheries, and areas formerly classified as rural but recently “urbanized,” do not have RCs at all, or develop them only slowly.

As residents acquire a greater stake in their neighbourhoods through housing privatization and the decreasing salience of the *danwei*, the relatively statist organizational form of the RC is being challenged by groups seeking more directly to represent owners’ interests. According to an estimate by officials of the MoCA, roughly 10 per cent of Chinese housing developments hire a property management company to handle maintenance and other tasks.⁴² Regulations issued by national housing authorities in 1994 allow residents to organize and elect their own management committees (*guanli weiyuanhui* or *guanweihui*)⁴³ to handle relations with the companies. These management committees sometimes come into conflict with the RCs, which assert constitutional priority over other organizations. The establishment and official validation of such owners’ associations has sparked many controversies among city housing bureaus, residents, and property developers or managers. In some developments, associations have been constituted through a selection process carefully managed by government officials. In others, however, owners have banded together and organized themselves in a much more spontaneous and bottom-up fashion, insisting on the right to nominate and choose their own representatives. This in turn points to tensions surrounding the institution of the RC. It plays a role in handling many of the neighbourhood’s needs, which private enterprise also seeks to supply; it claims a privileged status while residents sometimes desire organizational channels that more directly represent their interests.

While the RCs themselves do elicit public participation and respond to their constituents’ needs, from the standpoint of democracy they have distinct limitations. On the positive side, the laws governing the committees have always stipulated that their members be elected. The 1989 Organizational Law strengthened these provisions, stating that the committee’s chair, vice-chairs and members be elected either by all residents, or by an electorate consisting of one member from each household, or by representatives from each of the Residents’ Small Groups.⁴⁴ Since then many cities have been holding elections on a regular three-year cycle, and some, such as Shenyang, Shanghai, Qindao, Nanjing and Beijing, are experimenting with variations in electoral procedures and organizational designs. To date, however, the great majority of elections have been

41. See, for instance, Shanghai Luwan District Government, “Guanyu wo qu dangqian juweihui gongzuo de qingkuang diaocha” (“A survey of current Residents’ Committee work in our district”), *CSJTX*, Vol. 5, No. 12 (1995), pp. 17.

42. See Shao Hang and Peng Jianfen, “Ying yifa queli juweihui zai xin jian zhuzhai xiaoqu guanli shang de zhongxin diwei” (“It is necessary to establish the central position of the Residents’ Committee in the management of newly built residential neighbourhoods in accordance with the law”), *CSJTX*, Vol. 8, No. 7 (1998), pp. 2–4.

43. In private housing these are sometimes called “owners committees,” *yezhu weiyuanhui*.

44. *Compiled Statutes of the PRC*, p. 141.

limited to voting by "representatives" who are often chosen by the RC itself from among its activists and supporters. Moreover, government street offices tend to be heavily involved in the selection of RC staff; often they hire new RC members to work for a trial period of a few months, and then hold an election to confirm their choice. In areas where stipends are low, municipal officials report having difficulty finding people to serve. Given that RC service is more like a job than an after-hours avocation, only those with time on their hands (and not active younger people with full-time employment) are drawn to it.

As in the case of the Villagers' Committees, the driving force behind reforms in urban areas is the government's desire to strengthen local administration by recruiting people with skills and credibility to serve in quasi-official positions. The contrast with village-level experiments in democracy is that where villages handle crucial matters of property administration, taxes and the like, RCs remain secondary to the workplace in their relevance to most families' livelihoods.⁴⁵ One could say that the RCs do both too much and too little: they handle so many administrative and economic tasks that working for them can be dauntingly laborious, yet because their representative functions are generally weak, RC elections hold relatively little significance for most urbanites. Thus their contribution to democratic change is cramped by constraints in the procedures through which elections are handled, as well as the basic nature of the institution. Nevertheless, MoCA officials I interviewed also asserted that urbanites are increasingly conscious of their rights under the law and increasingly inclined to insist that these rights be respected, for instance in demanding that elections be carried out according to the rules. While this claim will require empirical verification, such a growth in rights consciousness would fit in with trends others have observed,⁴⁶ and would suggest an urban parallel to the hoped-for salutary effects of village elections.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Residents' Committees are an example of both the persistence and the evolution of grassroots organizational forms from the days when the CCP consolidated its control over urban society. They maintain a legally privileged position as the primary legitimate form of neighbourhood organization, serving the state's purposes by facilitating administration and policing, and also providing many forms of assistance to those under

45. On differences between Villagers' Committees and Residents' Committees, see the MoCA-edited volume *Shijian yu sikao (Practice and Reflection)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1992), pp. 325–345.

46. Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful resistance," *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (October 1996); Pei Minxin, "Citizens v. mandarins: administrative litigation in China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 152 (December 1997).

47. Following an anonymous reviewer of this article, one could also hypothesize that institutions like the RCs inherently work at cross-purposes towards increased legalism, as they are designed to handle residents' affairs through personalized contacts outside bureaucratic channels.

their jurisdiction. The RCs have made tentative steps towards democratization, and have ceased many of the intrusive practices that once made them feared. They have responded with alacrity to new opportunities provided by the market economy and have taken on a range of new functions, while the governments of some cities have made significant investments in them.

RCs vary tremendously between different areas, ranging from the non-existent or moribund to the hyperactive; the tenor and effectiveness of their work is shaped in specific cases by municipal policies, local architecture and business patterns, demographic characteristics, and the individual personalities of their staff members. Channelling participation into orthodox, statist patterns, they mobilize millions of people into various forms of neighbourhood service. They are designed to form a personal link between urban governments and citizens; to draw upon community social ties in accomplishing tasks for the state and helping households solve everyday problems.

China's cities are undergoing rapid changes with the demolition of old neighbourhoods, the construction of new developments and the privatization of housing. Urban governments and the MoCA are conducting many experiments in neighbourhood administration, even as new forms of resident self-organization emerge. The street-level interactions among power, property, community and organization promise to become all the more interesting in the years ahead.