

Life at the Grassroots

CITY DWELLERS

LIFE ON THE COMMUNE

INSIDE A SHANGHAI FACTORY

OUT ON THE GRASSLAND

Life at the Grassroots

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Life at the Grassroots

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A Word to Our Readers

Numbering 1,000 million, the Chinese people make up one of the most potent and yet unpublicized human factors in the world today. How does this one-quarter of mankind work, live and think? What are their concerns and aspirations, their sorrows and joys? This modest booklet is intended as a first step towards answering such questions.

Housewives, farmers, herdsmen, clerks, factory workers, cadres and technicians — these are the common folk of China about whom **Life at the Grassroots** is written. Told in their own words, their stories span a variety of backgrounds and generations, revealing the complexity of China's population. Details about daily lifestyles and routines, interspersed with reflections on the past and expectations for the future, give this work a multi-dimensional character at once personal and informative.

People are more easily understood when seen as part of their social environment. The lives of the individuals in this booklet are therefore presented in the context of the circumstances which influence them most, their homes and workplaces. How they are socially organized and what roles they play in these organizations are also shown. In the process, a great deal is said about the institutions themselves, making this additionally a study of basic so-

cial relations and the associations between individual and community in modern Chinese society.

Life at the Grassroots is admittedly only a glimpse into the kaleidoscopic world of New China. Compiled from four separately written special features published earlier in *Beijing Review*, the booklet has been limited by space and stylistic differences among the original reports. For all its shortcomings, it remains an accurate reflection of the tremendous changes that have taken and are still taking place in this vast and ancient land.

City Dwellers

Upwards of 130 million Chinese live in the cities and towns, of which the metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin are the largest. This investigative report on community life in a precinct of Beijing provides an insight into urban life in China through an examination of the interplay between individuals and their social organizations.



City Dwellers & the Neighbourhood Committee

SPRING time, 1981. The lights in many houses on Reed Bed Lane (Weikeng Hutong) went out one by one shortly after nine for several nights running. Their occupants were getting up earlier than usual on the following morning to plant flowers and shrubs to brighten their streets. The work was voluntary, one of the many activities organized by the local neighbourhood committee.

The urban neighbourhood committee is a self-governing popular organization whose members are elected directly by the local residents. It is entrusted with tasks which the local government cannot perform, but which nevertheless vitally affect residents' interests.

Beijing Municipality is divided into ten districts, including the city proper and some adjacent suburbs. Each district governs an average of three to five neighbourhood agencies, while a fairly big district may have as many as ten. There are altogether 85 such agencies in Beijing serving as arms of the district people's government.

The average neighbourhood agency, though not large, covers a precinct of more than 50,000 residents. Meeting the demands of so many people and relaying their opinions and requests to the district government concerned is no

easy job. The neighbourhood committee to a large extent makes this possible.

How the Neighbourhood Committee Functions

The neighbourhood committee is not part of the political power structure but functions under the leadership of the neighbourhood agency. Each committee takes care of three to seven hundred households and is composed of from 7 to 18 members, each of whom is elected by the neighbourhood group to which he or she belongs. The usual term of office is one year. Committee members choose among themselves a chairperson and assistants. All members volunteer their services to the neighbourhood without salary; however, in case of need, a reasonable government subsidy may be granted.

The functions of the neighbourhood committee are to establish and run public welfare projects of all kinds, relay local residents' opinions and demands to government agencies, help solve domestic problems, encourage residents to respond to government requests and abide by the law, take responsibility together with the residents themselves for security matters, and mediate between any residents who have differences.

Actually, neighbourhood committees handle a multitude of other problems as well. Over the past few years, for instance, they have been helping neighbourhood agencies find jobs for middle school graduates. They have also done organizational work among residents, aimed at

Organization of Beijing Municipality (including adjacent suburbs)

Beijing Municipal People's Government



District People's Governments

(10)



District Government Arms:

Neighbourhood Agencies

(85)



Popular Organizations: Neighbourhood

Committees

(1,794)

Mediation Committees

(1,378)

Security Committees

(1,672)

Neighbourhood Groups

(14,755)

improving public security, sanitation and outdoor beauty in the communities.

Each neighbourhood committee sponsors a health clinic which co-ordinates with a local district hospital in taking care of public health and epidemic-prevention. These health clinics are also equipped to give medical treatment to residents with minor illnesses. Family planning is now one of the health clinics' main priorities.

The neighbourhood committee thus acts as liaison between people and government organs. A resident may, for example, complain to his neighbourhood committee about noise or waste pollution by a nearby factory. The neighbourhood committee may then discuss the matter with the factory authorities, and if nothing is done, the neighbourhood agency or district government may intervene.

Security and Mediation Committees

These popular organizations come under the joint leadership of the neighbourhood committees and agencies, and function in co-operation with local public security organs and the people's courts.

The security committee helps maintain public security and order. Committee members are all local residents who know their neighbours fairly well — which persons in the community, for example, have committed crimes or disturbed the peace in other ways. Emphasis is placed on crime prevention through educating, organizing and encouraging the residents themselves to take adequate security measures; however, these committees have also

The *Hutongs* of Beijing

THE word *butong*, which is what the small back streets or lanes of Beijing are called, is an unusual term used only in Beijing and a few northern cities. In fact it came originally from Mongolian roots. In the northern grasslands, communities tended to form around wells, so *bot*, or "well" in Mongolian, came also to mean a town, and a *budu* or *budun*, variants of it, a camp or village. Later applied to a small street, the sound gradually changed to *butong*.

Small streets in Beijing began to be called *butongs* after the Nuzhen people from the northeast, who founded the Jin Dynasty, captured the city in 1127 and made it their capital. The custom became more widespread when the city was the capital of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) after the Mongol conquest.

Beijing's history is preserved in the names of its *butongs*. Some retain the names of famous persons who once lived there, such as Wu Liang Daren for His Excellency Wu Liang. Others are named for well-known craftsmen or shops, such as Doufu Chen Hutong for a beancurd seller named Chen. There are also lanes with names like Jinyu (Goldfish) and Shoupa (Handkerchief).

Generally speaking, when one of the winding *butongs* makes a major turn, it takes on a new name. There are some 6,000 *butongs* in Beijing. In the wider ones two buses can pass. The narrowest spot is the southern end of Gaoxiao Hutong, through which only one person can walk at a time. The longest, Rongxian (Embroidery Floss) Hutong, is two kilometres, the shortest, Yichi Dajie (One-Foot Street), only twenty metres.

assisted residents in recovering stolen property, and have successfully helped some juvenile delinquents to change their ways. In addition, as the nation's legal system has been instituted on a sounder basis over the past few years, security committees have played an important role in explaining the newly enacted laws to the populace so that everyone knows their content.

The mediation committee helps iron out differences among local residents which in many cases have arisen simply because of overcrowded living conditions. There are also occasions of sons and daughters refusing to look after their aged parents, of husbands mistreating wives and of quarrels between husband and wife. The mediation committees handle such cases according to government policy so that the parties involved do not have to go to court. In 1980 alone, these committees mediated in 521,318 cases of civil dispute in Beijing, more than five times the number of civil cases handled that year by the capital's district people's courts.

The people who work in these popular organizations are highly respected in their communities for always being ready to help. Well acquainted with their neighbourhood situation, they are often able to solve problems in a more practical and suitable way than outside government organs. They are liked and trusted and so can act as competent assistants to the people's government, helping to improve local community life and cementing ties between the government and the people.

These organizations were weakened during the turmoil of the "cultural revolution," while some even fell into the hands of ultra-Leftists. An urgent task today is therefore to restructure and underpin these grassroots popular organizations. Early in 1980 the National People's Congress Standing Committee once again publicized the regulations governing urban neighbourhood agencies

and committees that were first promulgated in 1954, reaffirming the validity and importance of these regulations. Since then, the Beijing Municipality and district governments have sent trained personnel into many of these organizations to help them in their work.

Reed Bed Lane Neighbourhood Committee

The Neighbourhood Committee of Reed Bed Lane takes care of 2,100 residents living in 620 households. Ten neighbourhood groups comprise the committee.

Public Welfare Is Their Concern

Committee chairperson Guan Shumin is 71 now. Her 30 years of work in the neighbourhood have made her well-acquainted with almost all of the families there. Though she no longer does all the footwork she once did, she goes to the committee office every day to receive residents and handle committee business.

The office is just one simply furnished room, but it is tidy and well lighted. It has bookshelves with a variety of publications for teenagers, as well as a 14-inch black-and-white TV set for community residents who do not have one of their own. They pay two cents to watch an evening's programme, which helps defray electricity expenses. The committee's monthly operation allowance from the district government is very small, so it has to count every penny.

Meng Suyi, who heads the security committee, is another old-timer in neighbourhood work. She used to chair the mediation committee and left with an excellent record. She also served as an assessor in the People's Court of Xicheng District. At 55 she is an energetic woman always eager to help others. Her husband is an invalid, but with two grown children, Meng Suyi is able to take care of him and work in the neighbourhood as well. The other three assistant heads of the neighbourhood committee are all middle-aged women who like their work of serving the community.

"Sometimes," said Meng, who is also a vice-chairperson of the committee, "it's hard to say what has kept us busy all day. There are so many different kinds of things to do. A few days ago we had to notify each household about killing mosquitoes that night; in a few days we'll issue rat poison to our residents and tell them how to get rid of rats with it. The new school term has started, and our committee will send letters to the schools requesting tuition exemption for some financially worse-off families. And now with the weather getting cold, it's our duty to visit homes to see if stoves and flues are properly installed to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Then there are the arrangements to be made for pre-school-age children to receive their preventive inoculations against polio. . . . Of course, all these things are not done by just a few of us. We get help from the neighbourhood groups, who also serve the community without pay."

Old-Time Slum

Reed Bed, or Weikeng, got its name from the reed swamp it was built on in the days before liberation. At that time it was a slum area and had only one well for