The Politics of Community Building in Urban China

Thomas Heberer and
Christian Göbel

Chinese Worlds

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常州大学山书馆
藏书章

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Times New Roman by Glyph International Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham,Wiltshire

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Heberer, Thomas.
The politics of community building in urban China / Thomas Heberer and Christian Göbel.
p. cm. – (Chinese worlds)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Community development–China. 2. Neighborhood government–China. 3. Urban policy–China. I. Göbel, Christian, 1973 June 25- II. Title.
HN740.Z9C63783 2011
307.1'4160951–dc22 2010039696

ISBN 978-0-415-59702-9 (hbk)
ISBN 978-0-203-82845-8 (ebk)

The Politics of Community Building in Urban China

This book aims to make sense of the recent reform of neighbourhood institutions in urban China. It builds on the observation that the late 1990s saw a comeback of the state in urban China after the increased economization of life in the 1980s had initially forced it to withdraw. Based on several months of fieldwork in locations ranging from poor and dilapidated neighbourhoods in Shenyang City to middle-class gated communities in Shenzhen, the authors analyse recent attempts by the central government to enhance stability in China's increasingly volatile cities.

In particular, they argue that the central government has begun to restructure urban neighbourhoods, and has encouraged residents to govern themselves by means of democratic procedures. Heberer and Göbel also contend that whilst on the one hand, the central government has managed to bring the Party-state back into urban society, especially by tapping into a range of social groups that depend on it, it has not, however, managed to establish a broad base for participation. In testing this hypothesis, the book examines the rationales, strategies, and impacts of this comeback by systematically analysing how the reorganization of neighbourhood committees was actually conducted and find that opportunities for participation were far more limited than initially promised.

The book will be of interest to students and scholars of Chinese Studies, Development Studies, Urban Studies, and Asian Studies in general.

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Chinese Worlds

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Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the support of many individuals and institutions. We would like to thank the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation), whose financial support made this project possible. Our research partner, the Institute of Sociology at Renmin University in Beijing, facilitated access to many field sites. For this we are very grateful. Above all, we would like to express our heartfelt appreciation towards our joint field researcher Professor Yu Xianyang. He worked with great commitment and did his utmost to help us implement our project on the ground. We are also very grateful to Professor Li Lulu for his strong support of the project.

The large numbers of residents and officials who, through their various efforts, facilitated the success of our research, deserve special thanks. We would in particular like to mention the Bureaus for Civil Affairs in Shenyang, Chongqing and Shenzhen; the officials and residents of Yuzhong and Jiangbei district in Chongqing, Fuhua and Nanshan district in Shenzhen, and Dadong district in Shenyang; the Street Offices of Guancheng and Chang'an (Shenyang), Lianglukou and Guanyinqiao (Chongqing), Fuhua and Shahe (Shenzhen), and the Residents' Committees of Yongfeng and Chang'an Shequ (Shenyang), Zhongshan Erlu and Jianbei Shequ (Chongqing), and Futian and Huaxiajie Shequ (Shenzhen).

We also would like to express special thanks to our colleague, Professor Gunter Schubert (Tuebingen University), who conducted the research on rural China that was part of our larger project examining participation and regime legitimacy in China. Further thanks go to Halima Chen for an excellent job done in proof-reading the whole manuscript, and to Tobias Becker and Patrick Prädikow for their diligence in helping us format the manuscript. A grant by the social science research focus 'Change of Contemporary Societies' at the University Duisburg-Essen, to finance the proof-reading of this manuscript is gratefully acknowledged. Finally, we would like to thank Stephanie Rodgers and Ed Needle at Routledge for expertly guiding us through the publication process.

Above all, we owe a special debt of gratitude to our wives, Jing Wang and Heike-Alice Göbel, for their love, support, encouragement, and inspiration.

Christian Göbel and Thomas Heberer
Duisburg/Lund, August 2010

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
GDP	gross domestic product
GONGO	government-organized non-governmental organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
NPC	National People's Congress
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PC	People's Congress
PRC	People's Republic of China
RC	Residents' Committee
SOE	state-owned enterprise
SQ	shequ

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1 Introduction

Political innovation without democratization

Ever since the 1989 mass uprising on Beijing's Tiananmen Square, social scientists have predicted the impending death of China's one-party regime. Whereas the student demonstrations of the late 1980s and the contemporaneous institution of villagers' self-governance nurtured hopes for a bottom-up democratization, violent peasant protests in the mid- and late 1990s and the rising urban–rural wealth gap gave rise to concerns (or hopes?) that the regime might simply implode. Neither happened, however, and gradually, and often grudgingly, Western social scientists have conceded that statements of a 'coming collapse of China' (Chang 2001) might have been premature.

Thus, it looks as if we misinterpreted several of the indicators that ostensibly signalled a regime change and ignored others that signalled the opposite. Village elections are a good example. In 1987, the same time that the student protest movement began to form in Anhui Province, experiments were being conducted with direct elections and self-governance at the village level. Remarkably, these experiments were backed not by a reformer, but the conservative head of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), Peng Zhen (Kelliher 1997). Their purpose was not to democratize China, but to enable villagers to solve conflicts directly at the grassroots level without involving higher-level government, as they had done for centuries in imperial times. Besides the payment of taxes, the provision of soldiers, and the occasional sermon on Confucianism (Hsiao 1960), villages had had scarce contact with the imperial government, a situation that Philip C.C. Huang aptly names 'centralized minimalism' (Huang 2008). In 1987, elections were reintroduced mainly because the return to family farming and the necessity to regulate newly emerging private markets required a degree of regulatory flexibility at the grassroots level greater than the township level could provide. The conservative reformers calculated that these time-tested measures would disburden the central government and make the villagers more amenable to central policies.

Still, many Western and Chinese scholars hoped that the return to old practices in modern times might eventually prove a 'Trojan horse of democracy' (Schubert 2002). They predicted that this 'local self-administration' (*difang zizhi*) would surpass its prescribed regulatory boundaries, nurture pluralism and finally challenge the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Thus, it was hypothesized

that the development and consolidation of local participatory processes could pave the way for the democratization of the entire political system. While much research is still being conducted to find out what effects the implementation of village elections and self-governance is having on the values and beliefs of China's peasants, it is certain that they have not been turned into Western-style democrats (*Renmin Ribao* 13 May 2009, 1 June 2009; *Zhonggong Zhongyang bangongting* 2009; Interview Party School Qingdao, 9 September 2008; Interview Suining/Sichuan, 17 September 2008; Interview Sichuan University, 23 September 2008).[1]

The reorganization of China's urban neighbourhoods

It is perhaps because of this disenchantment with the failure of China's more competitive village elections to democratize China that urban grassroots developments have received far less attention in Western scholarship, especially, but also in Chinese scholarship (Wu 2002). This is undeserved, as we will show, since much can be learned from a thorough study of China's urban communities (*shequ*).

Similar to the innovations in village self-governance undertaken since the late 1980s, reform has also been taking place in China's urban neighbourhoods to create communities in which residents take care of their own affairs by means of a semi-official organization. Instead of the government solving social problems in a paternalistic fashion, residents were being encouraged to govern themselves by means of democratic procedures. As had been the case in the village reforms, the authorities stressed that the holding of direct and democratic elections was an important cornerstone of urban self-governance. In addition, it was emphasized that the reorganization of urban neighbourhoods was not an attempt to realize abstract notions of participatory democracy, but to solve very concrete problems. The *shequ* became one of many organizational innovations designed to address changing socio-economic circumstances and to help maintain stability in a country shaken by rapidly increasing inequality and social tensions. The marketization of the Chinese economy had caused the closure of inefficient state enterprises, and many urban residents found themselves without work. At the same time, the privatization of the real-estate market allowed people to choose their place of residence more freely. Both developments contributed to the erosion of the *danwei*, which are frequently and misleadingly translated as 'work units'. In fact, the *danwei* is a social space, often separated from its surrounding environment by a wall, centred on a public enterprise such as a state-owned factory, a government agency, a university, or a school. The *danwei* bore an all-encompassing responsibility for the lives of their employees, including social security, which leads David Bray to call them the 'foundation of urban China'. He describes the *danwei* as:

> the source of employment and material support for the majority of urban residents; it organizes, regulates, polices, trains, educates, and protects them; it provides them with identity and face; and, within distinct spatial units,

> it forms integrated communities through which urban residents derive their sense of place and social belonging.
>
> (Bray 2005: 5)

The fact that the erosion of the *danwei* correlated with an increase in street crimes, as well as protests by the unemployed and the 'new underclass', seems to bear testament to the centrality of this organization to social stability in China, as do the attempts by the central government to create substitute organizations in areas where the *danwei* lost influence. In particular, the construction of 'communities' was aimed at providing a new locus for welfare provision and social control, and thereby compensating for the lack of social security systems, an inadequate legal framework, the absence of social control, and eroding values. The core organizations of urban self-governance in these communities were the Residents' Committees (*jumin weiyuanhui*; RCs), which have existed throughout most of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC). They used to consist of mainly elderly volunteers surveying the neighbourhood for breaches of birth control regulations, violations of residency laws, illegal cohabitation of unmarried couples, and other issues of public security. These volunteers were generally not elected,[2] and although they functioned as the extension of China's public security system, they did not have any political powers and did not enjoy much social prestige, generally. The significant restructuring of the RCs, however, was an integral part of the 'community construction' (*shequ jianshe*) that commenced in the late 1990s. Their name did not change, but the tasks, composition, and the process for member selection of the restructured RCs were completely different from those of their predecessors. Thus, by flexibly creating compensatory institutions that were inspired by traditional structures of local governance, the Chinese government reacted to the challenges of a changing economic and social environment (Schäfer 2007).[3]

In other words, the reorganization of China's neighbourhoods represents a comeback of the state after a gradual retreat that had started in the early 1980s and lasted until the late 1990s. As the next chapter will show, this retreat manifested itself in the state's pulling out from the provision of social security, housing, and indeed the personal life of most Chinese urbanites, and had far-reaching consequences for social stability and, by extension, the legitimacy of the CCP.

It should be noted that it is a matter of debate whether or not this changed role of the central government should really be called a 'retreat'. Gary Sigley argues to the contrary when he defines 'retreat' as 'a strategic withdrawal either after a defeat or in the face of superior forces'. He prefers the term 'regrouping', by which he means that 'plans and people are reorganized to suit new objectives, circumstances or strategies' (Sigley 2006: 497).[4] Although Sigley's scepticism against overly simplistic metaphors of conquest and defeat is warranted, we nevertheless feel it prudent to retain the term 'retreat' when referring to the grave reduction of state involvement in certain policy fields.

Conversely, the central government's reaction to increased inequality, alienation, and rising rates of criminality can indeed be comprehended as a 'regrouping'

of the Chinese state. This regrouping, we argue, manifested itself as a double-pronged strategy: the first of which was to enhance what Michael Mann (1984) calls the 'infrastructural power' of the state, through the improvement of legal frameworks, the extension of the administrative apparatus, and more generally the capacity to regulate social life. While this might at first seem like a re-enactment of the paternalist state of the Mao era, there is a crucial difference which pertains to the second strategy: the central government aimed at co-opting society into the government of the community by means of fostering local self-governance, with the hope that such empowerment would generate support for the regime. In other words, the top-down creation of urban communities within an institutional framework tightly regulated by the central government was aimed at instrumentalizing participation in order to enhance state control over society. Far from being opposites, the two strategies of enhancing state infrastructural power and building local communities are in fact compatible. Infrastructural power underlies not only the provision of services that cannot (yet) be provided by subsidiary means, but also the creation of structures that shape and guide urban self-governance. Enhanced infrastructural power enables the Chinese Party-state to set and adjust the limits of participation and local autonomy. Clearly, the aim of the central state is not genuine participation and autonomy, which might eventually call into question the supremacy of the CCP in China's political system, but a better provision of social services at a lower price to the government.

Seen in this light, the reorganization of China's urban neighbourhoods becomes an intriguing object of study. Most importantly, it negates the often-quoted dichotomy of economic transformation versus political stagnation. As this example illustrates, China's political system is changing rapidly. However, these changes tend to slip past our normative radar because they are not aimed at liberalization or even democratization. Instead, they might very well contribute to making China's one-party system more resilient against external and internal challenges. Rural and urban self-governance are merely two instances of a far broader reform programme aimed at reforming and modernizing China's political system without democratizing it (Yu, K. 2006a, 2006b; 2009; Yan 2009).[5] Chinese leaders do frequently use the word 'democracy' in the context of these reforms, but it is quite clear that the term does not mean to them what it means to us. Whereas we tend to see democracy as an end in itself, Chinese leaders understand it merely as a set of participatory mechanisms that can be employed to further non-democratic political aims. It is no coincidence, however, that a concept that seems to be so much at odds with an authoritarian context is so frequently used. Giving such a strong normative concept its own meaning allows the Chinese government to soften the impact when the term is used as a discursive weapon against its authoritarian rule. These and other 'technologies of government' (Foucault 2007) feature as prominently in the construction and administration of the *shequ* as the institutional innovations that enhance state infrastructural power. 'Democracy' and 'self-governance' are terms frequently mentioned in government programs related to *shequ* construction, as are other strong normative concepts such as 'harmony', 'participation', 'morality' and, last but not least, 'community'.

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