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Community Governance Reform in Urban China: A Case Study of the Yantian Model in Shenzhen

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Abstract

A major feature of China's urban transformation has been the breakdown of the *danwei* system and the consequent efforts at community building. Since the early 1990s when a movement for neighbourhood-based community building was launched, different practices have appeared and the urban community has changed remarkably. Whilst a number of works have documented this transition, few revealed in sufficient detail the dynamics of shaping the profile of community space. This paper argues that the government's new-found priority on community building has facilitated the development of community autonomy and self-governance. The interplay of traditional administrative power and newly emerged community autonomous power drives the transition of the power structure at the grass-roots level in urban China. The Yantian Model of community governance in Shenzhen demonstrates how this transition unfolds as the reform of community governance embodies the interplay of these two different forces, probably with far-reaching impacts on state–society relations in urban China.

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Keywords: *Danwei* system; community building and governance; Yantian Model; Shenzhen; China

Introduction

A major feature of China's urban transformation has been the breakdown of the *danwei* system and the consequent efforts at community building. Since the early 1990s, when a movement for neighbourhood-based community building was launched, different practices have appeared and the urban community has changed remarkably. Whilst this transition has been well described, few studies discussed in sufficient detail the dynamics of shaping the profile of community space, in particular regarding the more recent changes since the late 1990s. This paper argues that a new-found priority placed on community building by the government, as the traditional *danwei* breaks down, has facilitated the development of community autonomy and self-governance. The interplay of traditional administrative power and newly emerged autonomous community power drives the transition of power structure at the grass-roots level in urban China. The paper discusses a community governance reform experience in the Yantian district of Shenzhen, dubbed in the Chinese policy discourse as the "Yantian Model". We show how the transition unfolds as the community governance reform embodies the interplay of these two different forces, and extrapolate its likely impact on state-society relations in urban China.

The *danwei* (work unit) had played a significant role in China's administrative system. It was not only the channel for distributing resources, but also the tool for state control over society (Walder, 1986; Whyte & Parish, 1984). Individuals depended on their *danweis* for political participation and the basic security of life, such as health care, housing, their children's education, and other social benefits. The integration of workplace and living space in the *danwei* had an unintended effect of strengthening the boundaries between different *danweis*, making inter-*danwei* co-operation difficult. Cities resembled collections of independent workplace-based communities, rather than integrated urban environments (Bray, 2006a, pp. 4–5). People spent most of their time within a distinct spatial territory defined by their *danwei*, and the top-down authority structure was the basic means to maintain order and impose sanctions.

However, this situation changed from the 1980s when the *danwei* compound shed its social welfare functions. This change was consistent

with broader reforms emphasizing decentralization and the separation of government and enterprises. The State Council issued a series of documents dismantling the social and control functions of the *danwei*, of which three documents were especially important. One is the “Provisional Regulations on Implementing Labour Contract System in State-Owned Enterprises” (Guoying qiye shixing laodong hetong zhidu zaxing guiding), which was enacted in 1986 to reform the personnel system of the *danweis*. This was followed by the “Opinions on Deepening the Reform of Labour and Personnel, Wages, and Social Insurance System in Enterprises” (Guanyu shenhua qiye laodong renshi, gongzi fenpei, shehui baoxian zhidu gaige de yijian), jointly issued by the Ministry of Labour, the Manufacture Office of the State Council, the State Commission for Restructuring the Economic System, the Ministry of Personnel, and the China Federation of Trade Unions in early 1992 to further reform the personnel system. The third was the “Circular of the State Council on Further Strengthening Urban Housing System Reform and Accelerating the Construction of Housing” (Guowuyuan guanyu jinyibu shenhua chengzhen zhufang zhidu gaige jiakuai zhufang jianshe de tongzhi), issued by the State Council in 1998. This document required the *danweis* to make a one-off sale of their housing stock to their workers at discount prices. Since then, the provision of other social goods such as education, housing, and health care, which was formerly provided by *danweis*, were also transferred to either the government or the market, a process generally described as “socialized and marketized provision”, with substantial impacts on the urban social structure (Wang & Murie, 1999; Zhao & Bourassa, 2003).

At the community level, the impacts of the *danwei* reform are reflected in two respects. First, the retreat of the *danwei* from housing provision has transformed the community profile. As many *danweis* stopped housing their workers after 1998, residence has become a commodity rather than a public good (He & Lu, 2007). Private ownership becomes the new norm as more private housing is developed. According to Zhou (2006), the homeownership rate in urban China increased sharply from about 30% in the late 1990s to over 70% in 2000.

Secondly, the disintegration of the *danwei* system has facilitated labour mobility. Workers are no longer dependent on their work units for a whole range of social and administrative functions. This, together with the fast-developing private sector, has greatly expanded employment options for the urban residents who have hence become much more mobile participants

in the increasingly flexible urban labour market (Lu, 1999; Xiang & Song, 1997).

The emergence of a new urban living space thus brought two challenges to the government. One was the disintegration of the organizational base for providing social services in the urban area. The other was that as individuals had more options and avenues for social and political participation, the question of state control arose. The government was concerned with the means to effectively deliver social services and at the same time to reconsolidate state control over individuals and society. The movement for neighbourhood-based community building was started in the 1990s to meet this challenge in urban China.

A number of works have discussed the policy and practices of community building in the urban area. A large body of the existing literature described the broad historical contexts in which these practices occurred (see, for example, Lu & Li, 2005; Wang, 2000). Other works presented the experiences of community building in different cities (see, for example, Chen, 2009; Yang, 2003). Still others speculated on the implications for the democratization of the urban grass-roots (see, for example, Gui, 2001; Shi, 2005).

These studies have contributed to our understanding of the community building and governance reforms in urban China. Most of them are largely descriptive, and relatively few have discussed the driving forces and dynamics of community building. Wu (2002) argues that marketization has created new elements beyond the reach of the state and eventually will shake the pillars of the traditional governing structure in urban China. Lin (2003) points out that the state's priorities determined the development of urban communities. Chen (2000) reveals that the development of community organizations and the emergence of social forces have led to the growth of community self-governance and facilitated the change in urban communities in the post-*danwei* era.

Major questions regarding the transition of community governance are still unanswered despite these works. First, given the prominence of marketization as a major driver of change, many aspects of this role have remained ambiguous. For example, will this role change over time as the market situation changes? Whilst marketization was the "obvious" initial impetus for reforming the urban governing system in the 1990s and the early 2000s, it may no longer be the main driving force under the present, changed, situation. Secondly, the state is no doubt the key driver of social and political reforms in China. However, as will be indicated, the state is not likely to

embark on a reform spontaneously. The question is, then, what has made the state act? Thirdly, although social forces may propel reform from the bottom up, social autonomy cannot be sustained in a socialist country without the advocacy and active support of the party-state regime. Hence, as the urban community structure continues to evolve in the new century, it is necessary to reconsider what factors drive this continuous restructuring of the community management system and what the effects are. These questions are unresolved by previous studies.

This paper argues that the interplay of traditional administrative power and the newly emerged autonomous forces shapes the profile of community building and facilitates the transition of the urban grass-roots society. This is a result of the change of government priorities on community building policies. The following sections examine why the government's priorities have changed, and how the change has resulted in a change of power configurations in the urban grass-roots community in the Yantian district of Shenzhen, in the Guangdong Province in South China.

Local experimentation with the new forms of grass-roots community governance exhibits variations, as in other policy arenas. The variations are usually around the mode of specific interactions between the traditional administrative power and the newly emerged social forces at the community level. The mode that has evolved in Yantian, described as the "Yantian Model" in the Chinese policy discourse, sees the establishment of two different agencies to take up the functions of administration and communal self-governance, and thus has facilitated a more "balanced" structure of power configurations in the new urban community governance than some of the other local practices.¹ The operation of this emergent new model of urban community governance also appears to have worked relatively well since its formation in the early 2000s. The direct election ratio of residents' committees has reached 100% in the Yantian district in the past several years, for example. For its progress the Yantian Model was awarded the Third Chinese Local Government Innovation Prize (Zhongguo

1 Some other well-known models are the Shanghai Model, Shenyang Model, and Jiangnan Model. The major feature of the Shanghai Model is the administrativization of community affairs, which is revealed by the dominant role of the Street Office (Sang, Yang, & Gu, 1999). At the other end, the Jianhan Model "evacuates" most of the administrative affairs from the community and seeks to establish a community self-government system (Chen, 2001); while the changes of the community management system in Qingdao and Shenyang are described by Benewick and Takahara (2002).

Difang Zhengfu Chuangxin Jiang)² in 2006. An examination of the Yantian Model will thus enable us to assess the strengths as well as the limits of the emerging new governance model at the grass-roots level in urban China.

Data was collected through fieldwork in 2009–10. Interviews with leaders of residents' committees, Street Offices, and community work offices were conducted, and documents and working reports were collected.

The priorities of government on community building have changed since the early 2000s. As the following sections will show, the focus of community building was to strengthen the administrative control over the grass-roots society at an early stage, which was characterized by reinforcing the administrative function of the Street Offices (*Jiedao Banshichu*) and residents' committees. Since the early 2000s, however, the government has started to advocate self-governance and self-reliance for the residents. It emphasizes the cultivation of community self-governance by sufficiently engaging residents and community organizations in community affairs. The change of government priorities on community building actually drives the development of community autonomy and self-governance (*shequ zizhi*) and undeniably changed the community power structure.³ Before we examine the Yantian Model in detail, the following will first outline how the community building policy was proposed, and subsequently evolved.

2 This is a non-governmental prize organized by three research institutes. They are the China Centre for Comparative Politics and Economics (affiliated with the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China), the Centre for Comparative Study of World Political Parties in the Central Party School of the Communist Party of China, and the China Centre for Government Innovation in the Peking University. The prize was launched in 2001 and is awarded once every two years. It has shown significant social influence. Hundreds of local government departments or agencies participate in this contest each time. For detailed information, see <http://www.chinainnovations.org/>

3 As to the Chinese word “*zizhi*”, there are two English translations: self-governance and autonomy. Bray (2006b, p. 543) suggested translating “*zizhi*” as “self-governance”, because he conceived that “*zizhi*” in Chinese context is “a more limited form of ‘self-governance’ in which the community is expected to manage its own affairs within the operational parameters established by government authorities”. However, the current authors argue that Bray’s understanding of “*zizhi*” reflects more the position of the government. From the perspective of residents and community agencies, under the umbrella of “*zizhi*”, they want more than “self-governing” in the government’s terms, and they struggle to take more control over their lives. The authors have thus used both “self-governance” and “autonomy” in this article to denote these notions of “*zizhi*”.

The Introduction of Community Building Policy

The notion of “community” first entered official discourse in China in the mid-1980s. But a clear definition of this term was not offered until 2000 with the enactment of the “Principles of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Nationally Promoting Urban Community Building” (Minzhengbu guanyu zai quanguo tuijin chengshi shequ jianshe de yijian). Community, in this document, was then defined as “a social life entity composed of people inhabiting a certain geographical area. This area refers to the jurisdiction of a residents’ committee, which has experienced the scale adjustment under the reform of the grass-roots administrative system”.⁴ Obviously, the community in China is understood not as a social collective formed by people who have common values and customs, but as a physical territory defined by a residents’ committee. Thus, the Chinese understanding of the community highlights two characteristics: administrative functions and a clearly defined geographical territory.

The breakdown of the *danwei* system means that the government needs to find a new means of social welfare provision, and the notion of the community provides an option. In 1987, the Ministry of Civil Affairs held a meeting in Wuhan to advocate community service (*shequ fuwu*) as a possible new form of social welfare provision in urban neighbourhoods (Xu, 2001). Community service was initially meant to serve only the disabled and aged, and family members of revolutionary martyrs. With a more mobile and “free flowing” population, the demand for community services escalated and population management became a new topic of government concern. Under such a context, combined with the government’s initiative to improve services for all the residents, the Ministry of Civil Affairs started the movement of community building in 1991 to introduce new functions for the urban grass-roots organizations and encourage an all-round development of urban communities (Xia, 2008).

Pilot measures of “community building” were first experimented with in nine districts in the cities of Beijing, Nanjing, and Hangzhou. Then 26 more districts joined in 1998. In 2000, the pilot community building project came to an end with the endorsement of the document “Principles

4 For the sake of city administration, the definition of community varies from place to place. Some define it according to the jurisdiction of the Street Office, others follow that of the residents’ committee; and still others fall in between.

of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Nationally Promoting Urban Community Building” (Minzhengbu guanyu zai quanguo tuijin chengshi shequ jianshe de yijian). This document extended community building to all cities, and clearly defined community building as “a process, led by the Party-state, of encouraging a healthy development of community politics, economics and culture as well as environment, and constantly improving the level and quality of residents’ life through building community capabilities, mobilizing community resources, strengthening community functions and resolving community problems” (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2000). From community service to community building, the community is no longer confined to the provision of social services, but becomes a new system to *organize* the urban population (Bray, 2006b).

For the government, community building is an important tool to promote social development and maintain urban stability through the reconstruction of grass-roots organizations. At the beginning of community building, the government’s priority was to strengthen administrative capacity by reinforcing the administrative functions of the Street Offices (*Jiedao Banshichu*) and the residents’ committees. Such an administrative pattern was named as a Street Office–Residents’ Committee System (*jie-juzhi*) (Hua, 2000), through which a large amount of resources – economic resources, administrative resources, and human resources – were flowing from the district government to the levels of the Street Offices and residents’ committees (Pan, 2002; Zhu, 2002). As a result, resident’s committees were absorbed into the administrative system and formed one pillar of the urban administration, a process which has been described as the “administrativization” of resident’s committees (Chen & Sun, 2006; Read, 2003; Wu, 2002). Lu and Li (2007) point out that the functions of residents’ committees at that time included political mobilization, public service provision, civic mediation, public order maintenance, and representation of public opinions. As state-delegated organizations, residents’ committees have played a significant role in helping the government implement policy and maintain social control.

There are three reasons for the strengthening of the role of the Street Office–Residents’ Committee System. First, with the breakdown of the *danwei* system, there was a need for an alternative system or organization to take over the functions of social control and service provision previously provided by the *danwei*. Street Offices and residents’ committees had already existed in the *danwei* period. These organizations thus became the natural choice to fill the gaps left behind by the dissolution of

danweis. Secondly, from the perspective of modern municipal administration, decentralization was the inevitable trend, with emphasis on citizen participation and co-operation between local government and grass-roots organizations. Hence, since the early 1990s, a number of administrative functions began to be transferred from the municipal and district levels to the grass-roots level. Thirdly, the ongoing socio-economic development in cities had generated more demands from residents, which the government found difficult to meet alone. As the government sought to involve grass-roots organizations in meeting these demands, residents' committees became the primary target of mobilization, given their close links with residents (Gui, Cheng, & Ma, 2006).

However, the operation of the Street Office–Residents' Committee System soon faced various difficulties. With more administrative tasks, the conflicts between Street Offices and residents' committees also escalated. Street Offices and residents' committees were two different entities, not only because of their different positions in the administrative networks, but also because of their different understanding of community affairs (Pan, 2002). For example, during the authors' investigations in Shanghai in 2004, some of the residents' committee leaders interviewed complained about how incapable and inefficient the Street Offices were and how the Street Offices often did things only to "show off" to the superordinate levels. Sometimes the residents' committee leaders resisted and evaded the tasks assigned by the Street Offices when they did not agree on these agendas. They had various strategies of resistance, such as slacking off or skimping some tasks, playing for time, and even directly refusing to carry out certain tasks (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2003; Zhu, 2002). Moreover, Street Office officials and residents' committee leaders often had different views on their relationship with each other. The Street Office officials considered the residents' committee members as their subordinates, but the residents' committee members saw themselves as co-workers or partners.

On the other hand, the Street Office–Residents' Committee System has confronted difficulties in coping with the complex organizational environment in urban communities. As a number of works have mentioned, new residential developments are being developed, and new organizations have emerged in the community territory along with housing privatization. Homeowners' associations (*yezhu weiyuanhui*) and property management companies (*wuye guanli gongsi*) are two main newly emerged community organizations. These organizations have different agendas on community

affairs.⁵ The different concerns are likely to cause conflicts among community organizations. On the other hand, some functions previously undertaken by residents' committees have been taken up by these new organizations.

The New Priority of Government Policy on Community Building

To reform the Street Office–Residents' Committee System, the government has advocated community self-governance and self-service since the early 2000s. In 2002, the report of the Sixteenth Party Congress emphasized that “we will improve urban residents' self-governance and build new-type and well-managed communities featuring civility and harmony”.⁶ This is the first official use of the term “urban residents' self-governance” in the central documents. The new priority of government promises the cultivation of community self-governance and autonomy by engaging residents and social organizations in community affairs.

In 2005, President Hu Jintao raised the notion of “harmonious society”, which has endowed new meaning to the traditional concept of “community building”. In the same year, the Minister of Civil Affairs, Li Xueju, emphasized that residents' self-governance should be the crucial element of harmonious community building (Yang and Wang, 2010, p. 170). The document “Decisions on the Major Issues of Building Socialist Harmonious Society” (Guanyu goujian shehuizhuyi hexie shehui ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding), issued at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth CPC Central Committee in 2006, claims to “improve residents' self-governance ... and achieve the positive interaction between government administration and residents' self-governance according to the law”.

5 The purpose of setting up a homeowners' association is to protect owners' housing-related interests, such as property quality, the level and appropriation of management fees, and community facilities. Homeowners' associations are responsible for holding owners' assembly, hiring and dismissing the property management company, overseeing housing management and the use of maintenance funds, and collecting and responding to owners' opinions on a regular basis. Property management companies are business entities entrusted by owners to provide the professional services of property management, including the routine collection of management fees and maintenance of account books, security of the property and its residents, daily routine maintenance of the property, and so on.

6 For details, see: http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2005-01/16/content_2467734.htm (accessed 4 August 2011).

The best example of community self-governance and autonomy is the practice of direct election of residents' committees since the early 2000s.⁷ The implementation of direct election of residents' committees in urban communities was triggered by two developments. In the first place, as residents' committees were increasingly engaged in administrative tasks, their principal role appeared to be the execution of administrative functions at the grass-roots level. This role was, however, in contradiction to the social and autonomous nature of residents' committees, which is clearly stated in "The Organic Law of Urban Residents' Committees" enacted in 1989. The law stipulates that residents' committees are grass-roots mass organizations for "the self-management, self-education, and self-help of the residents". During the authors' fieldwork, the residents' committee members we interviewed often complained of the administrative burden assigned to them. The tension between performing an administrative role and its original legal status as an autonomous social organization has apparently posed a dilemma to the Shenzhen government, and contributed to the eventual "retreat" of the state's direct application of administrative powers through the residents' committees and the decision to introduce direct elections to the residents' committees.

Secondly, the practice of village elections across the country since the 1990s has also given impetus to the reform of residents' committees. The idea of self-governance and autonomy has become commonly known to urban residents through rural village elections. Both government officials in general and grass-roots practitioners agreed that the autonomous nature of residents' committees should be restored. It was in this context that the direct election of residents' committees was implemented (Gui et al., 2006).

In addition, the government also encouraged the establishment of various cultural and recreational organizations in the community to help mobilize community resources for self-governance. In effect, these civic groups have been instrumental in the emergence of new community space and the growth of community autonomy, much beyond the original design of the government (Lin, 2002; Sun, 2001; Zhu, 2002). Based on their investigation in Qingdao, Benewick and Takahara (2002) find that communities enjoyed more freedom than before and to a certain extent the community organizations could make decisions on community affairs.

7 The direct election ratio of residents' committees varies greatly in different cities. Shenzhen, Ningbo, Shanghai, and Hangzhou are in the front rank, with 99%, 85%, 80%, and 75% respectively (*Nanfang City News*, 9 July 2011).

Tomba (2005) and Miao (2006) similarly found that the development of community organizations facilitated the growth of social autonomy.

The Yantian Model

Yantian is an administrative district of Shenzhen city, covering 72.63 square kilometres. By the end of 2009, the population of the Yantian district was 227,700. There are four Street Offices and 22 residents' committees under the jurisdiction of Yantian.⁸ Although Shenzhen is a new city with a short history of little more than three decades, the urban administrative system in Shenzhen is the same as for other places in China. There are three levels of management in Shenzhen, municipal, district, and the Street Office levels.⁹ Residents' committees, which used to serve as one level of the network to execute government administrative policies at the grass-roots level, are now self-governing organizations of the residents.

Like other cities in China, residents' committees in Shenzhen have played a significant role in providing social services and maintaining public order at the early stages of community building. As a result, the administrative functions of residents' committees in practice contradicted its social and autonomous nature. In order to restore the autonomy of residents' committees and at the same time to hold representatives of the government in urban communities, the Yantian district government initiated the reform of the community management system in 2002 (Yantian District Community Building Office, 2009).

The community governance system in the Yantian district has gone through two rounds of reform, in 2002 and 2005. The 2002 reform aimed at releasing the residents' committees from their administrative functions. Three strategies were adopted. Firstly, the boundary of each community was redefined. Some communities were thus combined and the number of communities in Yantian was reduced from 21 to 17.¹⁰ Secondly, the residents' committee was renamed as the community residents' committee,

8 See <http://www.yantian.gov.cn/main/zwzc/tjsj/nb/index.shtml?catalogId=3825> (accessed 22 January 2011).

9 The Street Office is not a level of government, but it plays an important role in the management structure of Chinese cities. It is the agency of district government. Thus, the Street Office is usually viewed as a level of administrative management.

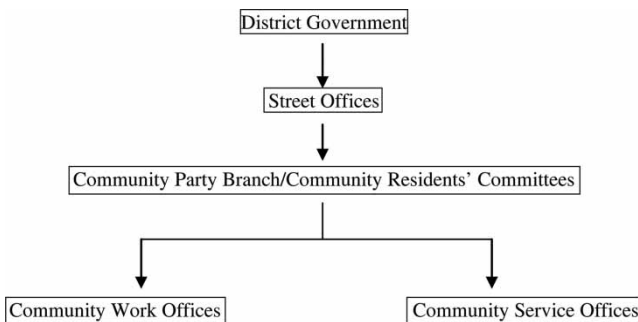
10 In 2008, the largest community was re-divided into two, so that the current number of communities in the Yantian district is 22.

with a redefinition of its duties. Thirdly, two working offices were set up under the community residents' committee, namely the community work office (*shequ gongzuozhan*) and the community service office (*shequ fuwuzhan*). This new structure was locally known as "One Committee, Constituting Two Offices" (*Yihui (he) liangzhan*) model (Figure 1).

The community residents' committee was responsible for making decisions on community affairs, managing community finance, and supervising the work of these two offices. The community work office undertook the administrative tasks assigned by the government, and implemented the decisions made by the community residents' committee. The function of the community service office was to provide services for the residents, such as community sanitation, cultural events, and entertainment. The idea was to disentangle the community residents' committee from specific administrative tasks so that it could focus its work on community affairs.

To a certain extent, this institutional arrangement resolved the problem of role conflicts within the residents' committee by setting up two new offices within it and assigning different duties to each of them. However, the division of labour and co-operation in day-to-day work became a new problem. The confusion of functions and conflict of power had often stood in the way. In order to improve efficiency, the Yantian district government embarked on a second round of reform in 2005. Guided by the concept of separating the decision-making power from the executive power (*yixing fenshe*), the community work office was separated organizationally from the community residents' committee. The community work office became independent of the community residents' committee in terms of staff, function, authority, finance, and administrative function. It became an agency

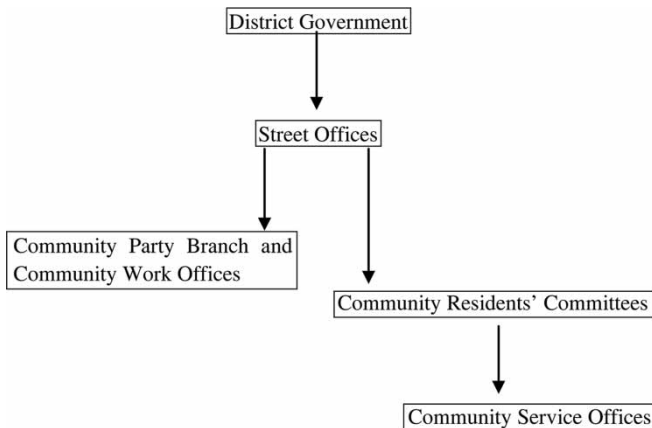
Figure 1 The Governing Model of "One Committee, Constituting Two Offices"



(*paichu jigou*) under the government Street Office. The community residents' committee, focusing on community service provision, has reverted to its original status of an autonomous mass organization, and is directly elected by all residents in the community. This model is known as "One Committee, Separating Two Offices" (*Yihui (fen) liangzhan*) (Figure 2), which is still running at present.

The responsibilities delegated to the community residents' committee are numerous. Generally, there are three aspects. First, it represents the interests of residents and serves as a bridge between the state and residents and other community organizations. The community residents' committee has the responsibility to co-ordinate the relations of homeowners' associations and property management companies as well as among other cultural and recreational organizations in the communities. Secondly, it provides services to the residents, such as taking care of the elderly, the disabled, and families in need. Thirdly, it organizes recreational and cultural activities. The community service office is an agent of the community residents' committee, responsible for executing service programmes. Remarkably, the community service office is now a civil non-enterprise organization that has been registered with the government by the community residents' committee. The community service office is financed in two ways. First, the government purchases its public service programmes through outsourcing arrangements so that residents can enjoy some services for free. Second, it offers user-pays services to residents.

Figure 2 The Governance Model of "One Committee, Separating Two Offices"



The community work office, as an agency of the Street Office, takes on administrative tasks assigned by the government. The main responsibilities of the community work office include community sanitation, community environment, community security, community culture, and family planning. Staff members of the community work office are appointed by, and accountable to, the Street Office. As to the finances, the community work office receives funds from the district government. Additionally, the community work office also has the duty to assist the community residents' committee to conduct community tasks, but the relationship between them is not one of administrative subordination.

The direct election of the community residents' committee in 2008 gives an example of how these two organizations co-operate in community public affairs. The direct election in the Yantian district took place on 27 May 2008. In order to conduct the election smoothly, an election committee was set up in the H community, which was composed of the leaders of the community work office and the community residents' committee, as well as the local party secretary. Before election day, the community work office held a series of meetings to discuss the effective propaganda programmes and mobilization strategies. Banners were hung up on footbridges and along the streets, and on the front doors of the major settlements. Meanwhile, staff members of the community work office accompanied by the residents' committee members visited each household to persuade the residents to register as voters and go to vote. On election day, they jointly prepared fixed ballot points or took mobile ballot boxes to the voters' homes to collect ballots. It could be seen that the community work office co-operated with the community residents' committee at every stage of the election.

To further strengthen the self-governance of the community residents' committees, a "Three Meetings System" (*Sanhui zhidu*) has been advocated and implemented in the communities since 2008. These three meetings are the democratic appraisal meeting (*minzhu pingyihui*), the democratic co-ordination meeting (*minzhu xietiaohui*), and the democratic public hearing (*minzhu tingzhenghui*). The democratic appraisal meeting is to be held once every year for residents to formally assess the work of the community residents' committee. The democratic co-ordination meeting "co-ordinates" the addressing of conflicts amongst residents, social groups, and the local government. The democratic public hearing facilitates residents' participation in community public affairs (DH Community Committee, 2009; Yantian District Community Building Office, 2009).

There are indications that the reform has started to bring about initial changes in the urban community landscape. A recent study has, for instance, reported a favourable assessment of the reform by a majority of residents in the Yantian district (Hou, 2007). During the authors' interviews with local government officials and community workers,¹¹ both groups indicated that the main goals of the government in community governance reform have been achieved with the establishment of the Yantian Model. First, the community residents' committees have been repositioned to their "due" place. The community work offices, as the agents of the Street Office, now undertake the administrative tasks previously assigned to the community residents' committees, so that it is possible for the community residents' committees to function as the mass organizations of self-management, self-education and self-help for the residents. Secondly, the administrative capacity of government at the grass-roots level has been enhanced. Under the previous Street Office-Residents' Committee System, a lot of government work was assigned to the residents' committees. Owing to the complexity of the work, a shortage of appropriate staff, and other reasons, the residents' committees often found it difficult to complete all the work, which in turn undercut the administrative capacity of the government. The Yantian Model resolves this problem by setting up a new "community work office". Thirdly, a new system of residents' self-governance has emerged. All eligible residents are to elect the members of the community residents' committee, which becomes the central body of community self-governance with functions of relaying residents' opinions to the government on the one hand and monitoring the work of the community service offices and – to some extent – the community work offices on the other.

The Change of Power Structure

Under the Yantian Model, the newly instituted community work offices are to exercise administrative powers at the urban community level on behalf of the government, while the community residents' committees pursue community self-governance and autonomy. The Yantian Model has been considered a pioneer in the practice of community governance reform and in

11 Community workers refer to the group of people who work in the community. In the Yantian district, this group of people includes members of the community work office, community residents' committee, and community service office.

particular in its exploration of a way to integrate administrative and autonomous forces for better community governance (Hou, 2007).

Essentially, the development of community self-governance and autonomy in the course of community governance reform has changed the power structure at the grass-roots level. As the Yantian Model indicates, various organizations and groups are involved in the process of decision-making or the completion of community tasks and the provision of public services. The authors' interview with a community leader suggests that the community residents' committees and the "Three Meetings System" have fostered residents' capacity to negotiate with the government. For example, the local government once planned to improve a street park near the H housing estate in 2009. The renovation programme was worked out through holding democratic co-ordination meetings and public hearings, which assembled local officials, representatives of residents, construction organizations, and related enterprises and public institutions.¹² This implies that the administrative power is no longer the unique centre of power, but co-exists with the newly emerged autonomous power in the urban community space.

One characteristic of the interplay of these two forces is that they co-ordinate with as well as restrain each other. In comparison with the *danwei* era, the degree of administrative control has obviously reduced in urban communities. For the government, the development of community self-governance and autonomy helps to foster political support in two ways. A self-help service system aggregates social resources and thus reduces the costs of government. The running of civic services mainly depends on the active participation of unpaid volunteers from among local residents. Secondly, a system fostering mutual assistance among residents may alleviate social conflict, which in the long run will improve state legitimacy.

At the same time, the autonomous power in urban communities has been growing significantly. Besides the advocacy of local government, the bottom-up forces also contribute to it. People become concerned with their housing-related interests and expect more services to improve the quality of their community life and environment. More importantly, not a few communities see the growth of the civic leadership. These civic elites have a strong sense of belonging to their communities (Li, 2011; Xia, 2003). They are good at negotiating with the government to reformulate the rules of the game.

12 The authors interviewed Mr. Hu on 10 March 2010. He is a leader of the Donghe community residents' committee in the Yantian district.

It should be noticed that, however, the development of community autonomy cannot be achieved without the support of the administrative power. First, compared with the rural area, community autonomy does not endogenously grow up in the urban area. To a large extent, it is introduced by the government in seeking a solution to the administrative crisis. Even though many urban residents have a sense of self-governance and autonomy nowadays, it is not enough to embark on a reform from the bottom up. This is mainly because the neighbourhood-based community is different from the *danwei*-based environment. People living in the same community are highly heterogeneous. The community is no longer the only resource pool available to the residents. More often, residents receive political and economic resources from outside their community. Secondly, the administrative power is still influential. During the course of institutional transition, it is sometimes necessary to make use of administrative power to cut through issues.

The development of the community system for delivering public services and enforcing the state's regulations, and the development of community autonomy to improve bottom-up feedback and to buttress the legitimacy of the government are the two goals of the government's community building policy. These two goals, however, result in tension between community self-governance and administrative control. The variant reform strategies, or "models", in different cities reflect the experimentation in balancing administrative power and autonomous power and containing the tension between the two. The defining characteristic of community governance in today's urban China is neither traditional administrative control nor communal autonomy, but reflects an evolving and thus highly unstable combination of the two.

Conclusion

With the breakdown of the *danwei* system dismantling the grass-roots administrative-social fabric in urban China, the Chinese government initiated a "community building" project to reconstruct the social communal structure. Different from the *danwei* system with its tight administrative control on individuals, the newly emergent community system sought to achieve social organization through residents' self-governance, embedded in an interdependent relationship between the government, residents, and the various community organizations.

With the Yantian Model, it can be seen that the administrative power and autonomous power are two forces shaping the urban community gov-

ernance reform. In the near future, a completely autonomous community governance model or a traditional administrative one is unlikely, but, rather, the interplay of administrative power and autonomous power will continue to drive the transition of the urban community governance system.

What is the impact of the interplay of administrative power and autonomous power on state–society relations in urban China? State–society relations in China have been the focus of a large and growing literature. Two important studies on this subject are Walder’s (1986) research on urban factories and Shue’s (1988) investigation of rural society. Outside the area of China studies, Migdal’s work (1988, 2001) has also been influential in many Chinese studies of urban community reforms (Li, 2007; Ma & Liu, 2005; Wu, 2002). In particular, Hou (2007) has described the relation of state and society presented by the Yantian reforms as one of “strong state, strong society”, which means that the state enhances its executive capacity while society achieves its autonomy. Xiao (2008) argues that the Yantian Model would lead to a co-operative state–society relationship because it has successfully divided the duties among different community organizations. The community work offices and community residents’ committees are independent of each other; one is the representative of the state at the local level, being an agency of the government Street Office, and the other is the representative of society as a mass organization at the grass-roots level. Yet they also work closely together – as shown in our brief discussion above of the direct election of the residents’ committee in 2008.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the relations between the state and society displayed by the Yantian Model are not always collaborative, but can be rather contradictory under some circumstances. For instance, in 2007 some residents in the Y community were not satisfied with their housing developer’s plan to construct new buildings in the common green area. When residents’ representatives complained to the community residents’ committee, they were told that this was an administrative matter which should be handled by the community work office instead. When they went to the community work office, they were told that this dispute was a civic issue which should be mediated by the community residents’ committee.¹³ It can be seen that both tended to shift responsibility to the other side when they were confronted with a problem.

13 This interview was conducted by Peng Kai on 28 March 2009.

It is too early now to attempt a conclusion on changing state–society relations in urban China. The governance framework of urban grass-roots communities has undergone revolutionary change since the 1980s, and the emergence of new actors with heterogeneous interests and goals has redefined the local power structure. Despite very substantial changes, however, the state as of today is still an important actor and authority, setting rules for the evolving new game. The same visibility of the role of the state is evident in this study of community governance reform in a city which is essentially a pioneer as well as a product of the immense economic and social transformation in China since the late 1970s. Contrary to the emphasis on the role of marketization as the driver to change in the literature, we have stressed here the active role of the state. How independent the society is of the state’s influence is still *largely* a function of the state’s decision on how much power it wants to shed or decentralize. On the other hand, the continuous development of the market-oriented economy – itself very much an outcome of the active Chinese state – has provided, and promises to provide further, a steady supply of impetus for decentralizing state power. This interaction of state and society forces in generating change echoes the observation in this paper on the interplay of administrative and socially autonomous powers in the micro change processes in the Yantian reforms.

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