Deliberating Governance in Chinese Urban Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the mechanisms of conflict resolution by public deliberation in Chinese urban residential communities. The analysis focuses on the interactions between three key actors of community life: Residents’ Committees (as the agent of the state), residents, and their representative organizations. Based on empirical data from three types of urban communities, the article finds that deliberation is more effective in communities where the power of Residents’ Committees over residents is weak, and deliberation also works better in communities with strong resident representatives who are able to mobilize information flows and to shape public reasoning. The findings suggest that, on the one hand, the governance structure of Chinese urban residential communities provides space for informal, unstructured public deliberation; on the other hand, deliberation also meets obstacles and dilemmas associated with representation, coordination and fostering understanding across social and economic divisions.

China’s economic and social change during the reform era has resulted in consistent and intense challenges to everyday governance. The extent to which the Party-state can maintain its legitimacy and social stability depends largely on how effectively governance is carried out at the grass-roots level. In the past two decades, a wide range of deliberative initiatives have been taken at the local level to seek governance legitimacy through participatory innovations. These deliberative activities, in the form of experimental consultative practices, endeavor to establish communicative channels between citizens and state authorities during the policy-making process, for example in participatory budgeting,1 public hearing meetings, village assemblies2 and consultation meetings for the popular

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election of local leaders.3 To date, however, only a few studies have documented the mechanisms of deliberative politics in pursuit of the reconciliation of social conflicts at the grass roots in China. Those studies have suggested that deliberative institutions can be effective instruments of conflict resolution and can improve the management of social unrest, bringing adversarial parties in a conflict to an acceptable consensus.4 Along with the increasing number of conflicts threatening social stability and thus the careers of local officials,5 a deliberative approach to reconcile conflict effectively at China’s grass roots is significant for shaping state–society relations, and deserves further investigation.

Theories of deliberative democracy arise as an expansion of the standard practices of representative democracy. In contrast to voting-centric views that see democracy as the arena in which fixed preferences and interests compete via fair mechanisms of aggregation, deliberative democracy emphasizes public discussion, reasoning, and preference-formation and -transformation among free and equal citizens.6 Rather than simple aggregation, compromise or bargaining equilibrium, deliberative democracy seeks legitimate political decision-making through informed, respectful and competent dialogue producing justification and the mutual agreement of those affected by a decision.7 Although studies to date often adopt diverse concepts of deliberation, they share the primary principles of deliberative democracy with regard to reason-giving, reciprocity, publicity and accountability. As Simone Chambers summarizes, “deliberation is debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new informa-

tion, and claims made by fellow participants. Although consensus need not be the ultimate aim of deliberation, and participants are expected to pursue their interests, an overarching interest in the legitimacy of outcomes (understood as justification to all affected) ideally characterizes deliberation.  

In Western democratic societies, deliberative democracy has been practiced through a variety of communicative activities, such as everyday talk among citizens, small-scale discussion forums and formal debate in the legislature. Those activities are seen as promoting the legitimacy of collective decisions, encouraging public-spirited perspectives on public issues, promoting mutually respectful processes of decision-making, and having the potential to correct mistakes made during previous collective actions. In the past two decades, a wide range of scholars have used the concept of deliberative democracy to analyze different political, social and cultural settings. In particular, the “authoritarian deliberation” thesis has contributed to the understanding of the democratization of authoritarian states where powers of decision are concentrated and controlled by élites. According to this thesis, deliberative practices can appear within an authoritarian regime led by a party with no apparent interest in regime-level democratization. By focusing on particular problems of governance and conflict resolution, authoritarian deliberation operates as a regime strategy for channeling political conflict away from “regime-level participation” and into “governance-level participation”.

Inspired by the authoritarian deliberation framework, studies of deliberative practices in China to date have largely focused on organized deliberative forums that have expanded participation in policy discussion, but the existing studies have not given as much attention to deliberative activities outside formal political organizations in China. As various scholars have pointed out, it is crucial for a healthy deliberative system to consider inclusive and informal deliberative gatherings among multiple actors and institutions. John Dryzek has specifically

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10. Amy Gutmann and Dennis F. Thompson, Why Deliberative Democracy?, pp. 10–12.
argued that informal, open and unstructured deliberations in the public sphere are especially significant in countries with a weak or non-existent formal structure of legislative deliberation. For Dryzek, informal deliberation in the public sphere only requires a loose connection to government to change the terms of discourse and to influence official decision-making over time. Therefore, while not denying the significance of the structured deliberative forums in formal institutions, this article focuses on unstructured, informal deliberation in urban China.

It is important to note that deliberation is not the only means of community conflict resolution or the only form of grass-roots democratization in urban China. Existing studies have documented numerous conflict-resolution mechanisms, including legal action, petition, mediation, demonstration, protest and violent confrontation. The focus on public deliberation in this article only suggests that deliberation has an instrumental and beneficial role in supplementing and supporting these other mechanisms. As Dennis Thompson points out, “we can more clearly retain the connection to the central aim of deliberative theory if we treat these other activities as part of a larger democratic process, rather than as instances of deliberation per se”.

As this article shows, deliberative activities in urban communities evolve alongside other forms of political participation; and non-deliberative activities such as protests and petitions can be the driving force, as well as the outcome, of deliberation. These non-deliberative activities can facilitate a larger-scale deliberative system by highlighting the conflicts that had previously been masked and by bringing more voices and interests into the decision-making processes.

The empirical information used in this article was collected from three different types of urban residential communities in Shenyang, the capital of Liaoning Province in northeastern China. These included eight middle-class gated communities, eight worker communities and six relocation communities. Between 2011 and 2013 I visited those communities repeatedly and conducted 98 in-depth interviews with community residents, Residents’ Committee staff members, community service providers and local government officials. The article will first explain a deliberative approach for urban grass-roots governance and then discuss the factors that exert an impact on a deliberative approach for conflict resolution in Chinese urban residential communities. These factors include

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power relationships between the Residents’ Committee and the residents, and the existence of resident representative organizations and participants’ deliberative competency. The article concludes with the tentative discussion of a deliberative system of grass-roots governance in urban China.

A DELIBERATIVE APPROACH FOR GRASS-ROOTS GOVERNANCE IN URBAN CHINA

Theories of deliberative democracy investigate and evaluate the forms and quality of deliberation, as well as a range of social, economic, political and historical conditions necessary for healthy deliberation. However, empirical studies often face the challenge of how to identify the different impacts of multiple factors that affect a deliberative process at the same time. In response to this persistent problem, a group of deliberative theorists have proposed a systemic approach which emphasizes the interdependence and interactions of various sites and elements within a larger system, including such communicative processes as arguing, demonstrating, expressing and persuading. By evaluating the functions of diverse actors, events and outcomes in contributing to a healthy deliberative system, the systemic approach considers micro-level deliberative forums and macro-level communication in the public sphere as part of one dynamic system.

This article employs this systemic approach to analyze conflict-resolution mechanisms. To assess the effectiveness of deliberation, I use three key criteria proposed by John Dryzek for analyzing deliberative systems. According to Dryzek, a functional deliberative system involves the processes of a wide range of free communications in the public sphere influencing institutional-level policy- or decision-making, and the decision-making institutions responding to the public sphere. More specifically, it needs, first of all, authentic deliberation with preference-formation in a non-coercive fashion, connecting particular claims to more general principles and communicating using reasoned arguments. Second, it requires inclusive deliberation that emphasizes the opportunity and ability of all affected actors (or their representatives) to participate. Third, deliberation is expected to be consequential, to influence (directly or indirectly) collective decisions or social outcomes. Through a qualitative approach, this article illustrates how these criteria can be used to analyze public deliberation, institutional

coordination and reasoning competency (the key aspects of a functional deliberative system) in the context of contemporary China.\textsuperscript{21}

Public deliberation at the urban grass-roots level has received little attention, compared to deliberative practices in rural villages and townships. This article considers Chinese urban residential communities (shequ 社区) as important venues for a deliberative system of grass-roots governance in urban China. Urban residential communities in China are not the same private realm of urban life as in most other countries; instead, they are the sites of urban administration and active governance in which citizens and the state interact on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{22} In Chinese urban residential communities, how to deal with community affairs is not entirely up to the residents themselves. The state penetrates citizens’ private lives by assigning agents to urban residential communities in the form of Residents’ Committees (jumin weiyuanhui 居民委员会 or juweihui 居委会), which are composed of staff hired by the local government.

Residents’ Committees in Shenyang administer local affairs and residents’ everyday life by performing numerous tasks, including: receiving and facilitating the social welfare applications of unemployed residents; providing assistance to the elderly, sick and disabled; managing community sanitation; organizing educational programs and recreational activities; and collecting firsthand statistical data and preparing reports for their supervisory level, the Street Office—the administrative agency of the district government. In addition to the administrative duties, Residents’ Committees are also required to report to higher-level government on community conflicts that could threaten the regime. Dramatic socio-economic changes have altered the context and scope of community conflicts—from trivial quarrels between residents to increasingly complicated social and political matters—to the extent that effective resolution now requires transparency and diplomatic skills.

In response to the change in Residents’ Committees’ tasks, full-time salaried staff members have replaced traditional retired resident volunteers. They are predominantly female staff who are younger (the majority being in their 20s or 30s), better-educated (college education is now required) and computer-literate. Shenyang carries out the recruitment of Residents’ Committee staff through public hiring led by the municipal government. After passing the written exams, the shortlisted candidates attend interviews organized by the Bureau of Civil Affairs (min zheng ju 民政局). The successful applicants are then assigned to different


communities. In principle, every 300 households are provided with one Residents’ Committee staff position. According to an official from the local Bureau of Civil Affairs, in 2014 the city had more than 9,000 Residents’ Committee staff in total. Almost all of them were under the age of 40 and had completed tertiary education. They were actively involved in organizing urban community life and moderating local conflicts on behalf of the state.

The existence of Residents’ Committees as government agencies poses the primary question of whether and how deliberative democracy can operate in urban residential communities. The answer lies in the “Chinese characteristics” of such governance structures at the urban grass-roots level. When it comes to deliberation for conflict resolution, the “Chinese characteristics” include multiple actors, such as individual residents, resident representative organizations, Residents’ Committees and local government. Deliberation also occurs at different sites and among various parties, including between Residents’ Committees (on behalf of local authority) and the public, between Residents’ Committees and resident representative organizations, and among different groups of residents. Through the overlapping and interactions among various actors and sites, a deliberative system with “Chinese characteristics” offers both incentives and opportunities for conflict resolution.

Incentives for Deliberation in Urban Communities

Along with the growing heterogeneity of the residents’ socioeconomic backgrounds, Chinese urban residential communities today experience increasing numbers of civil disputes as well as of disputes between citizens and the state. As the next section will explain, these conflicts are closely related to the specific conditions of citizens’ living environments, and invariably comprise an element of “rights defense” (wei quan 维权) against violations of residents’ legal rights and interests. Although the central government has tolerated, and at times even endorsed, rights defense activism, different levels of government are concerned that increasing rights defense activities will exacerbate social instability. Since “maintaining stability” (wei wen 维稳) is a priority governance task, an ability to solve community conflicts effectively has become a key criterion for the performance evaluation of Residents’ Committee staff. Thus, the Residents’ Committees actively monitor disputes within the community and endeavor to intervene in and mediate situations of conflict to prevent community conflict from escalating into large-scale social unrest.

A deliberative approach is significant for resolving community-level conflicts, in two distinct ways. First, deliberation meets the practical need for public opinion regarding what is to be done in the urban residential communities. As Simone Chambers has noted, “Deliberation is essentially practical . . . [and] involves giv-
ing, assessing and evaluating reasons for and against courses of action. The practical orientation of deliberation also explains that deliberative influences can affect political decision-making in the absence of regime-level democratization in authoritarian states. Conflicts in Chinese urban residential communities rarely challenge regime legitimacy, as they are largely linked to specific living environments rather than to general political claims. In the pursuit of conflict resolution in these communities, the interests of the citizens and the Residents’ Committees—on behalf of the state—are articulated more in relation to how specific and practical actions should be undertaken, rather than in relation to the substance of relevant social policies. This focus on practical matters offers opportunities and incentives for ordinary citizens to participate in deliberation in regard to community affairs.

Second, Chinese urban residential communities serve a deliberative system of governance well, as they offer multiple and divergent settings in which to deliberate in a decentered, plural complex of overlapping conversations. As case studies in the US show, these kinds of communicative activities among ordinary citizens are a distinct form of political participation, and contribute to the formation of a healthy democratic citizenry. In contrast to limited channels for citizens to participate in formal, organized deliberation in China, urban residential communities provide diverse venues for residents’ deliberative participation, including everyday talk, informal group discussions, online communication and organized community meetings. All these deliberative activities are a crucial part of a larger deliberative system in which “people come to understand better what they want and need, individually as well as collectively”. Moreover, the interdependence and multiple sites of deliberation contribute to the sustainability of a deliberative system in a dynamic way: when one site lacks good quality deliberation, other venues can fill in.

**Possibilities for Deliberation in Urban Communities**

When intervening in conflicts, Residents’ Committees are positioned between the residents and the state authorities: on the one hand, they represent the state through their daily administrative duties; on the other hand, they have very

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24. Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, “Authoritarian Deliberation”.
27. Jane Mansbridge *et al*., ”A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy”.
limited authority or resources to enforce final determinations. Unlike local governments, Residents’ Committees do not have control over the local police (although being in frequent contact with them); nor do they force residents to accept their decisions through intimidation, as do some village cadres. According to my interviews with residents and Residents’ Committee staff, the fact that its staff members are almost all female makes the Residents’ Committee less threatening. When Residents’ Committee staff go to individual households to collect information, residents are more willing to open their doors and respond to female staff than to male staff, especially in the evenings. Other studies have also demonstrated that Chinese urban residents in general do not fear their Residents’ Committee. Indeed, residents sometimes turn to these Committees to mediate conflicts, because of their semi-official status.

Residents’ Committees carry out their day-to-day work by building close personal relationships between staff and residents. The staff members maintain frequent contact with residents and organize recreational activities such as choirs, group dances and excursions. In most of the cases that I observed, the Residents' Committee staff recruit local volunteers through their personal networks in the community to facilitate their daily work. This governance strategy has also been observed elsewhere. In particular, Wen-I Liu and Chaolee Kuo’s field research documents a Residents’ Committee in Shanghai that has established a “Discussion Group”, where resident volunteers organize forums to gather opinions on residents’ concerns and to invite relevant government departments and specialists, as well as stakeholders and residents’ representatives, to attend the group meetings. In Shenyang, I observed similar practices, in which Residents’ Committees are engaged in and facilitate public discussion forums. In line with findings of other studies, my field research suggests that, despite its political surveillance function, Residents’ Committees enjoy substantial public support. This positive reputation is critical for the Committees’ capacity to reconcile community disputes when local volunteers mediate neighborhood squabbles.

Residents’ Committees’ simultaneous distance from and connection to state authority creates opportunities for pursuing conflict resolution—and by extension, community governance—through non-coercive, communicative means. My field research suggests that these possibilities sometimes enable deliberative


31. Wen-I Lin and Chaolee Kuo, “Community Governance and Pastorship in Shanghai”.

32. Benjamin L. Read, Roots of the State, p. 136.
systems to operate in urban residential communities, subject to three main factors: power relations in the communities, the strength of resident representatives, and the reasoning competency of the residents.

**DELIBERATION AND POWER STRUCTURES IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES**

In contrast to Maoist-era China, when urban employees were provided with public housing and shared similar socioeconomic status, today’s urban residents are filtered into different types of residential communities according to housing affordability. Nationwide, urban gated communities house public servants, professionals and business elites. As part of this national phenomenon, urban middle-class families in Shenyang live in exclusive gated communities with restricted entry and professional management services.33 Meanwhile, as one of the country’s traditional heavy industry centers, Shenyang was hit hard by the collapse of many state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the 1990s and, as a result, many of Shenyang’s former work unit residential compounds today accommodate large numbers of unemployed and laid-off workers.

In addition to middle-class and worker communities, so-called “relocation communities” (huiqian xiaoqu 回迁小区) have emerged as a new form of urban residential community for farmers who have lost their land. These are former residents of traditional villages who have been relocated to newly built residential communities on the urban fringe, as a result of expropriation of the villagers’ farmland and house sites. In Shenyang, in most relocation communities, the former village cadres have been excluded from the newly formed Residents’ Committees where the staff are recruited by the municipal government through public hiring.

This article refers to high-end urban gated communities as middle-class communities, and former work unit residential compounds with laid-off worker residents as worker communities. Among the new urban residential zones for landless farmers, the article focuses particularly on relocation communities where villagers have officially become urban residents34 but continue to maintain control of portions of their village collective economy. This classification does not represent or summarize all urban residential communities, but it highlights the distinctive features of several residential groups. The residents’ socioeconomic status, their experiences of community governance and their relations with other residents are summarized in table 1.

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34. The villagers have been granted urban household registration (hukou), and the Residents’ Committee has replaced the Village Committee in performing administration functions in the communities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities</th>
<th>Resident composition</th>
<th>Popular conflicts</th>
<th>Residents’ Committee’s major tasks</th>
<th>Resident representative organizations</th>
<th>Power relationship in the community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worker communities</td>
<td>Low-income urban households, with a large number of laid-off workers</td>
<td>Unfair implementation of social welfare programs</td>
<td>Facilitating social welfare programs Maintaining community sanitation Checking on temporary residents</td>
<td>Very few Residents’ Committee is in a dominant position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-class</td>
<td>Public servants, professionals and business élites</td>
<td>Homeowner activism to protect private property rights</td>
<td>Maintaining contact with the residents Monitoring homeowner activism</td>
<td>Homeowner association</td>
<td>Residents ignore or pay little attention to the Residents’ Committee Homeowner association can work with or against Residents’ Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relocation communities</td>
<td>Landless farmers who have been granted urban household registration</td>
<td>Unsatisfied with compensation for land expropriation</td>
<td>Facilitating social welfare programs Maintaining contact with the residents Monitoring individual and collective petitioning or protest</td>
<td>Village collective economy organization</td>
<td>Residents pay little attention to the Residents’ Committee Residents are in frequent contact with former village cadres Staff of Residents’ Committee rely on former village cadres to establish contacts with the residents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although Residents’ Committees exist in all urban residential communities, they do not all have the same degree of power over the residents. Whether and to what extent the Residents’ Committee is powerful in a residential community largely depends on the specific administrative tasks that it carries out and the nature of the conflicts associated with the specific economic and social conditions of the community. In the course of their administrative tasks, Residents’ Committees can shape the power structure in the communities by strengthening the Residents’ Committee’s own authority, as in worker communities.

**Power Relationships in Worker Communities**

In worker communities, low-income residents frequently lodge petitions with higher-level authorities about unfair and opaque decision-making regarding their application for social welfare support. Providing social welfare assistance to community residents constitutes the most significant component of the “community-building” scheme, which aims at more efficient governance at the local level in implementing the state’s social welfare program. Under the current social welfare assistance scheme in Shenyang, low-income urban residents apply for the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (dibao 低保) through the Residents’ Committees, which then administer the process of arranging evaluation and writing recommendation letters to local government offices. Low-income residents sometimes lodge individual petitions to higher-level authorities regarding refusal of their Minimum Livelihood Guarantee applications, accusing the Residents’ Committee of executing the application process without transparency or fairness. Once the Residents’ Committee staff members become aware of the resident’s petitioning plans, they attempt to persuade the resident to give up petitioning.

Communications on this issue take place in the shadow of the power relation between the Residents’ Committee and the residents in need of assistance. As a result of the application evaluation and recommendation procedure, Residents’ Committees in worker communities are much more powerful in mobilizing residents than are their counterparts in middle-class and relocation communities. For instance, on days when there is heavy snow in the harsh Shenyang winter, the Residents’ Committees in worker communities can easily find resident “volunteers”—usually dibao applicants—to clear the snow in the community’s public space. One laid-off resident explained: “All that is needed is one yell from the

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35. David Bray, “Building ‘Community’.”
Party Secretary: ‘Come out and clear the snow!’ Of course they never say you have to go, but if you don’t go this time, you definitely have no chance of getting the *dibao* next time.”

Essential to deliberative democracy is whether citizens can express their opinions freely as equals, and manipulation and coercion are considered to be its greatest obstacles.\(^{37}\) The unequal power relationship is an obstacle to deliberation in worker communities. Most of the time, both parties come into discussions over petitions with a fixed stance and are unwilling to modify their already-held opinions. There is little or no public reasoning, and intimidation is common. Sometimes the Residents’ Committee staff extorts the desired response from residents by threatening to withdraw their *dibao* entitlements if they do not relinquish their petition; conversely, residents have been known to threaten the lives of Residents’ Committee staff. I observed only two cases in which the Residents’ Committee and the residents reached an agreement through persuasion and compromise. In both cases, the Party Secretary was committed to explaining to the petitioning residents the evaluation process and how the Committee staff worked out who should receive the *dibao* in their recommendations to the local government. More importantly, the Party Secretary offered to help the residents to apply for other government welfare subsidies for low-income households.

One primary goal of deliberation is to reduce the level of mutual distrust and so build up mutual understanding. However, due to the powerful position of Residents’ Committees in this type of community, communication comprised of blame, intimidation and threat tend to reinforce the existing antagonism and distrust. Moreover, communication under the shadow of powerful Residents’ Committees fails to connect individual claims to more general concerns. The political nature of public deliberation in worker communities lies in the fact that the individual requests of *dibao* applicants and the application process itself also relate to larger collective concerns of low-income residents. Although the process addresses the applicant’s individual situation, concerns are collective and go beyond a small group of a few residents, since the problem that a neighbor encounters today may affect themselves tomorrow. Other residents rarely join the discussion or form collective requests, however, because they are afraid that doing so will jeopardize their relationship with the Residents’ Committee. Thus, in communities where residents rely more heavily on the support of state, strong Residents’ Committees hinder non-coercive and consequential deliberations.

Deliberating Governance in Chinese Urban Communities

Deliberation in Middle-Class Communities and Relocation Communities

The Minimum Livelihood Guarantee is less significant in middle-class communities and relocation communities. In middle-class communities, the residents consider social welfare assistance irrelevant and feel it best to keep Residents' Committees out of their private life. Many residents are unfamiliar with and indifferent to the staff of the Residents' Committees. Although relocation communities are under urban administration, in all the communities that I visited it is still the village collective economy that provides welfare support. As a result, most residents in relocation communities recognize their former village cadres, who administer and distribute the collective assets, rather than the new Residents' Committees, as the de facto governing authority in the community. In order to carry out their daily work, Residents' Committee staff in relocation communities, especially when they are not local, need to consult and work closely with the former village officials.

This leads to the Residents' Committee staff in middle-class and relocation communities being more compelled to facilitate deliberation to resolve intra-community conflicts. Gated community residents in Shenyang have organized collective resistance against inadequate maintenance of their housing-estate facilities, excessive management fees and the poor quality of management, as observed elsewhere.38 In relocation communities, both collective resistance and individual petitions are driven by unsatisfactory compensation for land expropriation, as well as over the generation and distribution of profits associated with the villagers' collectively owned land and properties.39

In these two types of communities, the involvement of Residents' Committees in deliberation serves several functions. First, they can be ideal third parties for moderating discussions in private and civil disputes. In middle-class and relocation communities, Residents' Committees typically have no direct interest in these disputes, so they are seen as impartial, independent mediators. More importantly, through their everyday work Residents' Committee staff members are in a position to know local conditions and what has given rise to the dispute, and can identify all parties that will be affected by decisions. For example, the Residents' Committee in Yijing Community collected opinions from its middle-class residents by distributing questionnaires to identify unsatisfactory service provided


by the management company, the residents’ suggestions of how to improve these services, and whether the residents preferred to terminate the contract with the company. When the residents and the management company sat down for a formal meeting, the Residents’ Committee helped to keep the discussions focused on the most practical matters indicated by the questionnaire survey.

Residents’ Committees can also influence community deliberation directly. For both civil disputes and citizen-state disputes, the semi-official status of Residents’ Committees can function as a connection between the public and decision-making authorities, to produce binding decisions or to influence policy reform. When Residents’ Committees are involved in talks, residents see their staff as representatives of the local government and seek to discuss issues with them. In relocation communities, it is common to see residents enter disputes with other residents about their living conditions, most commonly about garbage disposal or the use of communal space. Residents also frequently disagree with the local government’s policies on the provision of community services. For example, in many relocation communities the local government requires the village collective economy to share the expense of community sanitation, neighborhood security and infrastructure in the neighborhood, but the residents think that the government should cover those expenses as in other urban communities, instead of taking advantage of their collective economy. In this situation, the Residents’ Committee staff usually collect the residents’ questions and direct them to the local Street Office, or pass on the response of the local Street Office to the residents. During this process, the Residents’ Committee not only serves as a communicative channel for the exchange of opinion between locals and the government but also facilitates consequential deliberative outcomes in the public sphere.

Besides the governance settings of urban communities, the attitude and capacity of the local Party Secretary can also influence how successfully the Committee facilitates community deliberation. As shown in earlier studies, an open-minded Party Secretary committed to deliberation plays a decisive role during local institutional innovations. In urban communities, well-regarded Party Secretaries can also assist with effective deliberations. Ms Zhao, the Party Secretary of the Residents’ Committee in Fengyi Community, was praised by middle-class residents as “responsible, fair and caring for the interests of the residents”. This good reputation helped her team to organize frequent talks among residents, and between resident representatives and management companies. Ms Zhao also organized a mock court for residents, representatives of the management company and the development company to discuss an ongoing dispute. A legal expert was invited to participate and to offer advice to both parties. Despite homeowners’

41. James S. Fishkin, Baogang He, Robert C. Laskin and Alice Siu, “Deliberative Democracy in an Unlikely Place”; Baogang He and Stig Thøgersen, “Giving the People a Voice?”.
general lack of trust in the local government, they regularly invited Ms Zhao to their discussions with the management company. They did not see her presence at their meeting as an instance of the Residents’ Committee monitoring their activities, but regarded her rather as an impartial third party helping them to find a solution.

Not every Residents’ Committee, however, has a Party Secretary who enjoys such good standing and trust among residents. The semi-official status of Residents’ Committees can become an obstacle to deliberations in urban communities. In certain cases when Residents’ Committees are eager to achieve local stability, they exert pressure to dismiss complaints, or manipulate deliberations by creating divisions among residents. Such manipulation may bring short-term stability, but in the long run it costs the trust of the residents and leads to further difficulties in the future work of the Residents’ Committee. In Xingting Community, the Residents’ Committee threatened to request the help of local police if the residents organized protests in the neighborhood against the development company. Moreover, through clandestine deals with resident representatives, the Residents’ Committee managed to secure renewal of the property-management contract without conducting the required resident consultation meetings. As a result, the residents vented their anger and frustration on the Residents’ Committee and boycotted all its administrative tasks needing residents’ support. In some cases, they even refused to allow Residents’ Committee members to enter their homes to collect household information for the local population statistics. The Street Office eventually dismissed the Party Secretary of the Residents’ Committee for “ignoring residents’ opinions”.

Given China’s political setting, in which the Party is always the final decision-maker, it is very understandable that the Party Secretary is a significant factor in the success of any deliberative systems. Yet a deliberative approach to community governance requires more than a committed Party Secretary. Interaction and interdependence between various democratic practices and institutions are also necessary. The fact that a Party Secretary remains the backbone of existing deliberative experiments actually shows that democratization at the grass roots in China is still missing a functional mechanism for resolving disagreements and conflicts. Thus, although Residents’ Committees have the potential to lead one sub-system of deliberation by serving as moderators between deliberative actors, they are not sufficient on their own for a dynamic deliberative system in Chinese urban residential communities.

RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE ORGANIZATIONS AND PUBLIC REASONING

A second important factor in facilitating public deliberation in urban communities is the existence of resident representative organizations. Representatives play an essential role in real-world deliberation. In urban communities, it is almost
impossible for all two or three thousand residents to come together to deliberate, so self-appointed resident organizations normally act for those who are not participating. Strongly associated with the collective interests of certain resident groups, two kinds of resident representative organization are commonly observed: homeowner associations in middle-class communities; and shareholding cooperatives in relocation communities.

Homeowner associations (yewehui 业委会) are self-elected organizations formed among residents of gated communities. Their mission is to represent the collective interests of homeowners and to protect their private property rights, in particular from property developers. The real estate developers of urban gated communities usually take for granted their right to leave in place a property-management company to operate indefinitely and reap handsome profits from management fees. However, homeowner associations can fire the management company and select another firm to take care of maintenance and other functions in their housing complex. Across different localities in China, homeowner associations have actively led middle-class homeowner activism regarding the protection of their private properties.

Some relocation communities have maintained their collective economy in the form of village shareholding companies (gufen gongsi 股份公司) or shareholding cooperatives (gufenshe 股份社). In most cases, the company board consists of members of the previous Village Committee which had led the running of the village collective economy by pooling the village’s collective land resources. As observed in various places in China, especially in the Pearl River Delta, successful village cooperatives have played an influential role during the urbanization process by maintaining territorial autonomy, leading the bargaining process on land expropriation and organizing community-based industrial projects.

The resident representative organizations exist in parallel with Residents’ Committees. Though their independence is constrained by state policy, which requires that they are formed under the direction of relevant administrative agencies and obtain approval from the local government, resident representative organizations are widely established formally or informally by claiming to represent the residents. Members of such organizations consider themselves competent to act on behalf of residents. Bonded by their collective interests, the residents

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typically exhibit enthusiasm and maintain high expectations in relation to their representative organizations.

Strong resident representatives can counteract the potential coercion or manipulation of Residents’ Committees, by leading another sub-system of deliberation in urban communities that emphasizes mobilizing public reasoning. Public reasoning, the center of deliberative democracy and a cornerstone of participatory democracy, is absent in formal political organizations in China, but it exists elsewhere in Chinese society. From everyday talk to organized deliberative forums, individuals can develop and express their views, ascertain the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgements about matters of public concern. As Baogang He points out, a citizen-initiated deliberative forum is more effective than those organized by state institutions in creating a public space, challenging narrow official lines of thinking and changing people's opinions. In Chinese urban residential communities, resident representative organizations play a critical role in this process, by influencing information flow, preference-formation and the exchange and modification of opinion among the participants.

First, they organize small-group discussions with residents. The small-group discussions serve the purpose of what some scholars consider as “pre-deliberative dialogue” through which people can explore their differences in experience, attitude and belief and improve the mutual understanding needed for successful deliberation at a later stage. Particularly in relocation communities, the dense local social networks of the former village cadres have brought them unique advantages in strategic mobilization of certain groups in the village, such as well-respected seniors, the better-educated and clan leaders, to communicate with different groups of villagers. Most of the time, the newly hired staff of the Residents’ Committee rely heavily on the village cooperatives to organize such talks.

In a few middle-class communities that I visited, the homeowner association had set up an online forum to deliberate on conflicts between residents, staff of the management company and the Residents’ Committee. All participants were required to register with their true identity, including details identifying their residence, their management company and their Residents’ Committee. Such online forums were particularly helpful in clarifying misunderstandings. However, they were not widely used, since a large number of residents, especially elderly

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45. Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy"; Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.


residents, were not computer-literate. Resident representatives therefore more commonly organized face-to-face talks with the residents.

Second, while discussion in casual talks and informal group meetings among residents sometimes takes the form of straightforward practical claims or the presentation of detailed evidence, it more often consists of storytelling or anecdotes. For those without a sophisticated political vocabulary, narratives and personal stories are necessary in deliberations, as part of the reasoning process. As various scholars point out, reason is not wholly determined by the form that it takes, but rather by the function or purpose that it serves in discourse. In relocation communities, anecdotes and stories are particularly significant for public reasoning, not only because of the villagers' inherent disadvantages in political vocabulary but also because of the lack of transparency in local policy-making and implementation. In this context, anecdotes of how similar conflicts were resolved in other places shape citizens' preferences significantly.

For example, compensation deals for land expropriation are often negotiated directly between government representatives and individual households. As a result, villagers have no collective knowledge of local compensation policies or how they are implemented. In Jiaonan Community, the residents were relocated from seven different villages in the area after the villagers' land had been expropriated. After being relocated to urban residential communities, some villagers found out that there were substantial differences between the compensation amounts offered to people in neighboring villages. Thus, nearly a dozen villagers lodged petitions with the municipal government requesting more and fairer compensation. Through their personal networks, the village cooperative board members collected stories of how the compensation policy was carried through in other villages, and discussed such information with the residents through small-group meetings. With a perceived lack of transparency on the government's side, the stories or anecdotes circulating among the villagers formed the foundation for the villagers' specific collective claims on and requests to the government.

Third, the resident representative organizations were able to develop collective reasoning strategies to help empower residents' claims and requests. In line with most examples of "rightful resistance" in China, they framed citizens' claims by reference to protections implied in ideologies or conferred by policy-makers. In middle-class communities, the most efficient way for homeowner associations to achieve their collective goal is to frame their reasoning according to the state-endorsed discourse of defending the rights of homeowners. This kind of

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collective reasoning can help homeowner associations to attract the attention of higher-level authorities, without positioning themselves in opposition to local authorities.

Similarly, in relocation communities, when residents petition against unsatisfactory compensation for land expropriation, the village cooperatives coordinate public reasoning by inviting the staff members of the Residents’ Committees to present and explain local policies to the villagers and to discuss strategic details with them, that is, which government office to approach and how much extra compensation they are likely to receive. A former village cadre observed: “Some farmers overstate their compensation requests. Some government officials are bullies. If our villagers communicate giving good reasons, they are more likely to achieve their goal. You need strategies to resolve conflict. That’s what I call harmony.” The lack of public reasoning by government officials is one of the biggest obstacles to public deliberation in China.52 By helping villagers to frame their requests strategically with reasons relevant to popular discourses and government policies, village cooperatives help to establish a stronger civic sphere with more effective public deliberation.

As table 2 summarizes, resident representatives and Residents’ Committees are potentially engaging with two sub-systems of community deliberation in urban residential communities. Residents’ Committees can provide an inclusive and semi-formal platform allowing residents to express their opinions. Resident representatives, on the other hand, can mobilize public reasoning. The two sub-systems are related to and influenced by each other, and shape the dynamics of community governance.

**DELIBERATIVE COMPETENCY**

The third factor essential to a healthy and functional deliberative system in urban residential communities is deliberative competency, that is, the delivery of reasoned arguments with respectful dialogues that connect particular claims to more general principles. Compared to the attention given to equal opportunities for citizens to participate, and to the policy outcomes resulting from deliberation, deliberative competency is still addressed inadequately in studies of deliberative practices in China. As pointed out by deliberative democrats, reciprocity and publicity are two key norms of deliberative democracy.53 Reciprocity means that citizens must try to advance reasoned arguments which the other side(s) to the discussion can accept, and not simply advance the interests of dominant individ-

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uals and groups; publicity means that the process by which representatives arrive at decisions should be open and transparent. Deliberative competencies in this process are influenced by a wide range of factors, such as literacy and education, shared language, political culture and ideology. In Chinese urban residential communities, besides the restraints posed by the state, the limited deliberative competency of the residents and their representative organizations constitutes another obstacle to deliberative systems.

Different types of communities face different challenges to their deliberative competency, as summarized in table 2. In relocation communities, residents often encounter difficulties in framing their requests, due to their poor educational backgrounds and lack of knowledge of current government policy. The former farmers sometimes do not have well-defined preferences about alternative policy options that directly affect their material interests, namely, the development plan of their collective economy, but their preferences appear to be heavily influenced by the opinions of a few groups of residents. These include the village cooperative board members who are former village cadres familiar with the mentality of the local government; seniors well respected in the community; well-educated younger-generation villagers capable of explaining policy details; and villagers who have experienced similar circumstances. Among them, former village officials are particularly influential in shaping villagers’ preference-formation. The village officials’ significant leading role in villagers’ economic life means that they can dominate public reasoning and ignore marginalized voices. As Mansbridge et al. point out, social domination can distort deliberative systems.

In middle-class communities, one challenge is to mobilize residents to participate in deliberative activities. In urban gated communities, the segregated special setting and the desire for private living have resulted in infrequent social contact between residents. The middle-class residents are hard to mobilize to participate in community activities, and pay little attention to the Residents’ Committee. The resident representatives can often feel frustrated by the lack of participation when organizing meetings or collecting opinions from their fellow residents. Although protests and demonstrations by middle-class residents are commonly observed, the middle-class residents to whom I talked prefer talk-based solutions over protest. Those especially who work in the public sector favor a deliberative approach, because they are concerned that participating in protests may jeopardize their careers. When a deliberative approach is adopted, however, middle-class residents

encounter the other challenge of how to deal with disagreements and diverse opinions.

For example, when the residents in Kewang Community were establishing homeowner associations, they tried to be as inclusive and representative as possible. They elected seven homeowner association members—two retired high-ranking government officials, two wealthy private entrepreneurs, a senior manager of the biggest local state-owned enterprise, a professional lawyer and a retired university professor. The residents proudly nicknamed their homeowner association the “all-star team”. However, this expansive inclusiveness led to a dilemma in resolving disagreements about fee levels and whether they should fire the current management company. The elected members each brought their own proposals to meetings, which invariably concluded with more disagreements and split opinions than when they began. They accused each other of not listening to others’ opinions and trying to be the sole decision-maker (shuo le suan). One association member explained: “Those people are all leaders in their own work units. They want to extend their authority to the community.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communities</th>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Obstacles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worker communities</td>
<td>Residents and Residents’ Committee are in frequent contact and have good knowledge of the issues to be discussed</td>
<td>Coercive setting for deliberation due to the powerful positions of Residents’ Committee in the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle-class communities</td>
<td>Residents’ Committee facilitates pre-deliberative talks</td>
<td>Residents’ Committee manipulates deliberation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Residents’ Committee serves as moderator for the deliberative talks between homeowner association and management company</td>
<td>Homeowner association itself not being deliberative</td>
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<td>Relocation communities</td>
<td>Organizations of the collective economy mobilize discursive discussions</td>
<td>Villagers’ low educational level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Villagers develop reasoning strategies through discursive deliberation</td>
<td>Former village cadres manipulate deliberation or ignore marginalized voices</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
They don’t realize that, here in the community, we are equals and your authority at the workplace does not pertain.” It appears that, for Chinese urban elites, success in the workplace can be counter-productive when applied indiscriminately to deliberative participations regarding community affairs. In middle-class communities, deliberative competency requires greater understanding of democratic values and exercises in taking note of and responding to the opinions of others as equals, especially when they have opposing or alternative opinions.

CONCLUSION

This article analyzes deliberative means to resolve conflicts in Chinese urban residential communities. It shows that, in urban residential communities, deliberation can occur within a public sphere that is distant from but still connected to state power. The empirical analysis has illustrated three particular factors that are influential in the emergence of a robust deliberative system “with Chinese characteristics”. The first is the variation in Residents’ Committees’ power relationships with the residents in different communities, determined by the socioeconomic status of the residents and the residential settings. The second is the strength of the resident representative organizations, which is associated with the nature and strength of the collective interests of the residents. The third is the “deliberative competency” of the residents, which is associated with the specific participatory experiences of different groups.

The three factors suggest both opportunities for and limitations to public deliberation in urban communities. On the one hand, the governance structure of Chinese urban residential communities provides space for informal, unstructured public deliberation to resolve community conflicts. On the other hand, however, deliberation also meets obstacles and dilemmas, associated with representation, coordination and fostering understanding across social and economic divisions. More specifically, deliberative practices function more effectively in communities where the power of the Residents’ Committees over residents is weak, such as in middle-class and relocation communities, rather than in worker communities of laid-off workers. When deprived of coercive or intimidating power, Residents’ Committees can serve as facilitators or moderators of debate. Deliberation also helps to secure agreement when communities have resident representatives who are strong in circulating information and shaping public reasoning.

These empirical findings also illuminate a mechanism for conflict resolution in residential communities, consisting of a number of key actors, including Residents’ Committees, citizens and resident representatives. Three overlapping sub-systems of deliberation emerge: deliberation moderated by Residents’ Committees; public reasoning mobilized by resident representatives; and communication between residents and other interest groups. Each sub-system has its own strengths and weaknesses. Although a Residents’ Committee has the competence
to serve as a facilitator of deliberations, its function is constrained by its mission to maintain the CCP’s one-Party rule, its administrative tasks and its power over socioeconomically disadvantaged residents. Resident representative organizations can counteract intimidation or manipulation by the Residents’ Committees through public reasoning, but weaknesses in the deliberative competency of residents and their representatives often undermine this function. In communities where Residents’ Committees maintain a dominating authority over community affairs, it is essential to have strong residents’ representatives to transform the residents’ deliberative freedom into deliberative power. Further, when public deliberation lacks authenticity, Residents’ Committees may serve as facilitators or coordinators to improve the quality of the overall deliberative system. Successful deliberation appears to help in resolving social conflict and maintaining social stability, but it also sheds light on how central policies are received at the community level. By highlighting conflicts at the local level, deliberative practices have the potential to compel greater governmental transparency and accountability for policy-making at higher levels of authority.

In spite of its focus on conflict resolution in residential communities, the deliberative system described in this article has important implications for democratic governance in China. This deliberative approach reveals the emergence of spaces and opportunities for the public to express their opinions freely, the availability of transmission channels to allow public opinion to reach decision-making authorities and responses from the decision-making authorities, and participants’ reasoning abilities and consistent involvement in governance matters. In the Chinese context, such practices are more practical at the grass-roots level, particularly in regard to governance matters that do not threaten the regime. A functional deliberative system both contributes to more effective and functional governance and also has the potential to develop citizens’ democratic values and competency. Such competency includes not only the ability to pursue citizens’ rights and interests but also the ability to deal with disagreement and to present and respond to reasons intended to justify a political decision.57 As Jürg Steiner points out, where deliberation is most needed is in those countries in which deliberation is most difficult to achieve.58 China is just such a case.