The Prevalence and Importance of Semiformal Organizations and Semiformal Control in Rural China: Insights from a National Survey

Shanhe Jiang1 · Dawei Zhang2 · Darrell D. Irwin3

Received: 18 October 2021 / Accepted: 3 March 2022 / Published online: 21 March 2022 © The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2022

Abstract
This analysis of data collected from a nationwide survey in 2021 focused on the prevalence and importance of different forms of social control particularly semiformal social control in community order maintenance within rural China. Scholars have a growing interest in China’s semiformal control. However, prior studies lack quantitative research on the prevalence and importance of this semiformal control. Employing quantitative analysis, this study found that China uses a trinary (formal, semiformal, and informal) control system to maintain social order as contrasted with a Western binary (formal vs. informal) control system. Overall, semiformal organizations—village committees—are more prevalent and important than formal control mechanisms such as government and police and informal control mechanisms such as xiangxian or kin or kin-kind community leaders. Furthermore, the relative prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations and control are found to be associated with types of social order maintenance activities. These findings are meaningful for testing the generalizability of social disorganization theory and developing a China- or Asian-centric control theory.

Keywords  Semiformal organizations · Semiformal control · Rural governance · National survey · Village committees · Community order

* Dawei Zhang
zhangsir0619@sina.com
Shanhe Jiang
fx6954@wayne.edu
Darrell D. Irwin
darrell.irwin@uconn.edu

1 Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Wayne State University, 656 W Kirby St., Detroit, MI 48202, USA
2 Institute for China Rural Studies, Institute for Advanced Study in Political Science, Central China Normal University, 152 Luoyu Road, Wuhan 430079, China
3 School of Sociology, Central China Normal University, 152 Luoyu Road, Wuhan, Hubei 430079, China
Social control is grounded in societal context (Messner et al., 2017). To meet the rise of industrialization and capitalism, the West developed its suitable administrative system, which featured the rule of law supported by salaried, specialized civil servants. These bureaucrats work for the state to deliver public services to society (Huang, 2019). Under this tradition, the state mandates its criminal justice system to maintain social order while the community uses collective efforts to keep it safe. The former is formal control while the latter is informal control.

To turn to the Chinese context, built on the philosophy of Confucianism, “centralized minimalism,” which limited state bureaucracy and provided services to society via non-salaried quasi-officials, was developed in the Qing Dynasty (Huang, 2019). Under this administrative system tradition, state, quasi-officials and kin or kin-kind community leaders (xiangxian) all played roles in social control such as dispute mediations. This system continues today in China. Accordingly, while the West uses a binary (formal vs. informal) control system, China uses a trinary (formal, semiformal, and informal) control system to maintain social order.

Scholars have a growing interest in China’s semiformal control (Huang, 1993a, b, 2008, 2019; Jiang et al., 2013, 2015, 2019, 2021; Messner et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 1996, 2007). This body of literature describes and defines semiformal control in different ways. In common, the literature contends that semiformal control is prevalent and important in China’s social order maintenance. However, there is a lack of quantitative research on the prevalence and importance of the semiformal control, compared to formal and informal control. Furthermore, there are different types of social order maintenance activities. There is a lack of quantitative research on the association between types of social order maintenance activities and forms of social control. This study was undertaken to fill these gaps. Accordingly, the purposes of the current study are to (1) investigate how prevalent and important semiformal social control is in social order maintenance, compared with formal and informal control, and (2) find out whether the prevalence and importance varied with different types of social order maintenance activities.

The present findings from the study may contribute reasons to critically think about the generalizability of criminological theories originated in the West, particularly in the USA. For example, social disorganization theory, which has been advanced by Sampson et al.’s collective efficacy, stresses the importance of informal control in neighborhood order maintenance (Sampson et al., 1997). Messner et al. (2017) found that collective efficacy was not a very useful predictor of neighborhood variation in property crime victimization rates for Tianjin, China. They suggest that Chinese neighborhoods have different contexts than that in the West. In China, community committees play a prominent role in neighborhood order maintenance. Chinese neighborhoods build on collectivism. Community committees are imposed by the government and sponsor and facilitate citizens in social and crime control. Given these Chinese features absent in the West, it is possible to distinguish that there are cross-cultural variations in the manifestation of social disorganization theory. This study will examine whether informal social control plays a primary role in neighborhood order maintenance in rural China. In addition to possible theoretical contribution, the current study relates practical information that authorities making decisions may use to improve citizens’ perception of the importance of semiformal control.
Literature Review

Semiformal Organizations and Semiformal Social Control

For the purposes of this study, we need to clarify the definition of semiformal control. To do so, a related question must be answered: what is a semiformal organization? There are varied descriptions of semiformal organizations. As early as 1993, Philip C.C. Huang used the term “third realm” (1993a, 1993b) to describe the interaction between state and society via xiangbao (Huang, 1993a)—a quasi-official in social order maintenance during the Qing Dynasty. On the one hand, for easy control and maintaining loyalty, the Qing ruler limited the numbers of officials. The lowest government was yamen at the county level, and one yamen had an officer called a county magistrate. On the other hand, the ruler kept a minimum percentage of taxes (Huang, 2008). Obviously, the magistrate could not govern the entire county by himself. He must have assistants to help him govern (Huang, 1993a, b). The xiangbao played a crucial role by supplying a mode of assistance. Xiangbao was recommended by the local community and confirmed by the county magistrate to help process dispute issues so that he was “subject to the influence of both” (Huang, 1993b, p.227). Xiangbao retained a great deal of power in situations of rural governance. Huang (1993a) found that for those disputes before reaching the yamen, cases were largely settled by kin mediation. In the three counties, two-thirds cases ended in the middle stage of the lawsuit process. The majority of cases in this stage were resolved through the interaction between yamen and xiangbao. However, xiangbao was not an emperor-appointed officer and not salaried. He played a dual role. He served the county magistrate, while at the same time helped his fellow villagers. These interactions via xiangbao are the “third realm,” which was neither state nor society but a mixture of state and society. “For the majority of the local people, contact with the state occurred mainly in the third realm” (Huang, 1993a, p. 227). The “third realm” continued to the Guomindang government (1911–1949) and to contemporary China (1949 to present) (Huang, 1993a). Today, a typical “third realm” is community committees, found in residents’ committees in urban areas and village committees in rural areas.

Huang’s “third realm” has some important features. First, it is imposed or confirmed by the government but not acting as an official government department. Second, although it is not an official department, it can play an official role in governance. Third, it consists of quasi-officials who are not salaried civil servants but receive stipends or payments from the government.

Lening Zhang, Steven Messner, and their associates also looked at the role of semiformal organizations. Their focus was on urban community and its residents’ committees. Although they did not label residents’ committees semiformal organizations, they acknowledged its distinctive features. Residents’ committees are administrative grassroots organizations, created, sponsored, and directed by governmental agencies, and serve as liaisons between state and community. Intertwined, “(a) at the same time, members of neighborhood committees are not formal government employees, although they receive compensation. They are members of the community” (Messner et al., 2017, p. 547).

Acknowledging social control and community, Shanhe Jiang and his associates in 2015 explicitly used the phrase “semiformal organization.” After describing the features of semiformal organizations in terms of organizational structure, process, and environment, they summarized that:
semiformal organizations integrate formal and informal organizational features; they are grassroots organizations but are marked by the government; they are nongovernmental organizations, but have official power and responsibilities; and they are a bridge between the state and society. (p. 290)

Residents’ committees in urban areas and village committees in rural areas are the most prevalent semiformal organizations in China. According to China’s Residents’ Committee Act of 2018 and China’s Village Committee Act of 2018, a community committee is a self-governing grassroots organization. It usually has five to nine members in an urban area and three to seven members in a rural area. Committee members must be local residents and elected by the permanent residents in the community. They may receive some stipends from the government, but the amount of payment varies depending on the local economic development level. Community committees are “government organized and controlled entities” (Troyer, 1989, p. 27). For example, although the head(s) of the community committee is (are) elected by the local residents, their candidate status may need to be approved by the local government or the election results need to be officially recognized by the local government. A community committee has many duties including promoting governmental policies and community services (Jiang et al., 2010, 2013).

Built upon previous studies, Jiang et al. (2015) defined semiformal social control and described its features. Based on control rules and control units, semiformal control was defined as controlling action implemented by (1) semiformal organizations using sentiment, reason, and law and (2) formal organizations using sentiment and reason. Control carried out by semiformal organizations is the primary type of semiformal control used as the operational definition of semiformal control in the current study.

In the development of the semiformal control concept, Jiang and his associates incorporated Philip Huang’s “third realm” concept. Actions carried out by the third realm are labeled semiformal governance by Huang (e.g., Huang, 2008) rather than semiformal control. The phrase semiformal governance has a broader meaning than social control. This broader understanding of social control is discussed in Huang’s research focuses on social governance rather than social or crime control. In his discussion of the civil justice system, he explicitly refers to the formal process as code-based (state) court adjudication and the informal process as community or kin mediations (Huang, 1993b). Semiformal governance “occurred in the zone lying between formal government and informal society” is “overlapping, collaborative sphere of governance between the two” (Huang, 2008, p. 23). Jiang and his associates’ formation of the semiformal control concept has also benefited from other scholars’ studies, such as Zhang et al.’s investigation of Tiao-jie and Bang-jiao in social control and crime prevention in China (1996) and Chen’s (2004) comparison between Chinese and Western social and legal control and his term “quasi-formal.”

The current study adopts the definitions of semiformal organization and semiformal control developed by Jiang and his associates in 2015. What Jiang and his associates have advanced is the systematic review and discussion of semiformal organizations and semiformal control (Jiang et al., 2015). They explicitly define and distinguish between formal, informal, and semiformal control in terms of control rules and control units.

Formal and Informal Control and Community Order Maintenance in the West

Although this study does not directly test a criminological theory from the West, it does hope to build on an Asian-centric theory of social control, which in turn will make an intellectual contribution to the generalizability of social disorganization theory. Thus, in this
section, we briefly discuss the connection between forms of control, especially informal control, and community order maintenance in the West and provide a context for readers to comment on our findings in future studies of social controls from a cross-cultural perspective.

Western nations have traditionally used professional and law-based formal mechanisms to keep community order and control crime. However, with the recognition of the limited effectiveness of formal means in community safety maintenance, the West, particularly the USA, has developed a growing interest in informal control in practice over the past few decades. Correspondently, contemporary criminological theories in the USA have paid more attention to the functions of informal control in the community (Jiang & Lambert, 2009; Jiang et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2017). A salient example is the resurgence and expansion of social disorganization theory into criminology, which is most often associated with the introduction of Sampson and his associates’ neighborhood effects and collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 2002). There is a strong consensus among sociologists that within the social disorganization approach, “a key mechanism explaining the link between structural disadvantage and crime in urban neighborhoods is low levels of informal social control” (Silver & Miller, 2004, p. 552). Variation in community safety or crime rates in neighborhoods is “resulting primarily from differences in neighborhood ability and willingness to engage in informal social control” (Warner, 2007, p. 100).

Prevalence and Importance of Semiformal Control in China

Prevalence of semiformal control/governance is demonstrated by Philip Huang’s ethnographic research in civil adjudication and court mediation in China’s past and present (Huang, 1993a, b, 2006a, b, 2008, 2019). His ethnographic works show that semiformal governance existed in Qing civil justice and mediation in the areas including land disputes, debt disputes, marriage disputes, and inheritance disputes. It also manifested in administrative and social services areas such as tax collection, public security, famine relief, water control, and education. In the late Qing and early Guomindang era, “the third realm of gentry and merchant public activities operated mainly at the local and rural rather than national and urban level” (Huang, 1993b, p. 230). The Guomindang era and the People’s Republic embraced bureaucratization. The state apparatus was pushed down to district (subcounty ward) during the Guomindang and further down to street or township level in contemporary China (Huang, 2008). At the same time, China’s population greatly expanded. At the beginning of the People’s Republic, the total population was about 550 million and is now more than 1.4 billion. The average population per township/street is more than 36,000 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2021; National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). Due to a relatively large size of township and traditional governance culture, the township/street government, the lowest level of government in today’s China, continues to rely on community committees—semiformal organizations to provide services and maintain community order.

Community committees are responsible for neighborhood functions. They include disseminating and promoting laws and policies from the central government and local government; settling disputes; assisting the local police department to maintain public order; helping former offenders reenter the local community, household registration, local sanitation, and cleanliness activities; and a variety of other public services to the local residents, such as establishing senior centers, and helping dibao or poor people and people with disabilities. From both a legal perspective and actual operations, community committees are
the bridge between government and society. They serve both government and local citizens. They exist everywhere in the Chinese society. The latest statistics show that there are 113,000 urban communities and 495,000 villages (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2021). Each urban community has a residents’ committee while each village has a village committee. Although legally they are self-governing grassroots organizations, they are perceived as the lowest level of government by local citizens. They are semiformal organizations.

Jiang et al. (2019) discussed several reasons behind the prevalence of semiformal organizations and control in today’s China. Based on its cultural foundations, semiformal organizations build on qing (sentiment), li (norms or rules or norm-based reason), and fa (law). A combination of qing-li-fa has been long used to govern Chinese society, particularly in local communities (Martin, 2007). Huang (2008) called this cultural background “Confucianized legalism” or “a combination of Confucian with Legalist precepts” (Huang, 2008, p. 25). Confucianism emphasizes kin- or kinship-based sentiment and norms while legalism focuses on law and depersonalized bureaucracy. Sentiment as well as local norms especially in the countryside is still prevalent and may usurp formal law. Depersonalized bureaucracy from government may not work well at the local community, which gives community committees a reason to exist and be prevalent in local social control and governance.

From a functional perspective, semiformal organizations can carry out not only governmental functions but also those functions conducted by informal groups. For example, village leaders can and do supervise offenders who are under community corrections on behalf of the local government (Jiang et al., 2015). Law and government grant them the power to do so. As a kin member or village fellow, they can also persuade offenders to become law-abiding citizens since they grew up together and know each other well. Sentiment and local norms give village leaders the authority so that the village as well as offenders accepts their supervision and support. The qing-li-fa strategy used by village leaders is a combination of “hard” and “soft,” and is believed to work better than law-based formal control or morality-based informal control alone (Jiang et al., 2019).

From an organizational structure perspective, semiformal organizations are “a fusion of governmental employees and nongovernmental employees” (Jiang et al., 2015, p. 289). Non-governmental employees are unsalaried semi-officials who may be partially paid by both the local government and their communities or completely by local communities. Thus, government can save a great amount of money in social governance. In the Qing Dynasty, this cost effectiveness was an important reason for using quasi-officials (Huang, 2008). Conservative economic policies are still pursued today (Jiang et al., 2019). When semiformal organizations and control govern well in a cost-effective way, it is reasonable that they were suitable to rural China and remain prevalent.

In the present day, community committees are semiformal organizations that play a crucial role in community governance (Jiang et al., 2019; Zhang and Li, 2012). In mediations, the people’s mediation committee and administrative mediations are the manifestations of semiformal organizations (Sheng & Chen, 2011; Zhang et al., 1996; Messner et al., 2017). Due to increasing disputes at the community level, villagers appealed to higher level governments (shangfang) more than the legal system to settle their disputes (Michelson, 2007). Shangfang also becomes a challenge to local authorities and social stability. Thus, preventing and containing shangfang is an important responsibility for local government and the community committee director or party secretary. “Target responsibility system” (baobaozherengzhi) is a prevalent method in containing and preventing shangfang (Tian, 2012). Community leaders are an important part of this system. For example, under this system, working with higher level government officials, the community committee director
or party secretary is required to target citizens who are likely to appeal to higher level governments, especially central government agencies in Beijing.

Semiformal organizations also are prevalent in community corrections. In addition to generally requiring community committee to participate in community corrections, every township is expected to have “Community Corrections Teams” (Jiang et al., 2015). A team usually consists of one government employee from the local justice office, one social worker, one community leader, one volunteer, one offender’s family member, and if relevant, one member from the offender’s school or employer. The team is a combination of formal, semiformal, and informal elements. The team has legal power to supervise an offender. Semiformal organizations are also widespread and exert control in policing, birth control, and other community services (Jiang et al., 2019).

Although semiformal organizations and control are prevalent, there is a lack of quantitative research in this subject. We do not know how prevalent semiformal organizations and control are in social control and services. Is semiformal control more prevalent than formal and informal control? Does the prevalence of different forms of control depend on types of control activities? Only one recent study has been found to quantitatively examine the prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations and control. Based on a survey of 632 respondents, Jiang et al. (2021) investigated semiformal organizations and control during the initial COVID-19 crisis in China. The study compared the prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations and control. Based on a survey of 632 respondents, Jiang et al. (2021) investigated semiformal organizations and control in six community control and social service activities. Findings from this study revealed that formal organizations, the semiformal organizations, and informal groups all participated in community control and services. Semiformal organizations had the highest level of participation and ranked as the most important. Although the study is the first quantitative investigation of the prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations, formal organizations, and informal groups participating in community control and social service, it reflects the situation during a time of crisis—February to April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, among the community activities, five of them (health screening, food supply, drug shopping, community sanitization, COVID-19 information distribution) are social services that emerged in an emergency time. The study did not examine the correlations between forms of social control and types of community governance activities. Clearly, more research is needed.

**Types of Social Order Maintenance and Forms of Social Control**

This study includes ten items on social order maintenance issues in modern Chinese villages. The items were selected by the survey organizers who are experts in social governance in rural China, including one of the study’s co-authors. The item selection was also benefited from the survey pretests of graduate students and villagers. The ten items reflect the major activities in village order maintenance, including five within-village dispute mediations (items 1–5 in Table 1), four beyond-village dispute mediations (items 6–9 in Table 1), and one law-violating behavior (item 10 in Table 1). Disputes within a village are those disputes occurring between villagers and between an individual villager and his or her village as a group or collective. Disputes beyond a village are those existing between villagers and government and villagers’ appeals to higher level governments. Law-violating behaviors include violence, drug abuse, and crime that are usually dealt with by the criminal justice system.
| Village order maintenance activities | Government | Police | Village committee | Xiangxian | ANOVA | Post hoc tests* |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------|------------------|----------|-------|-----------------|
| 1. Family dispute mediation           | 2.05       | 2.04   | 3.43             | 2.43     | * p < .001 | Village > all other forms, government > xiangxian, police > xiangxian |
| 2. House property dispute mediation    | 2.39       | 2.09   | 3.49             | 1.97     | * p < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 3. Villager dispute mediation          | 2.08       | 2.26   | 3.38             | 2.24     | * p < .001 | Village > all other forms, police > government, xiangxian > government |
| 4. Villager vs. village committee dispute mediation | 2.70 | 2.11 | 3.20 | 1.95 | * p < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 5. Villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation | 2.74 | 2.13 | 3.32 | 1.72 | * p < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 6. Villager vs. government dispute mediation | 3.09 | 2.23 | 3.07 | 1.56 | * p < .001 | Village > police > xiangxian, government > police > xiangxian |
| 7. Villager shangfang mediation       | 3.05       | 2.29   | 3.03             | 1.55     | * p < .001 | Village > police > xiangxian, government > police > xiangxian |
| 8. Mass incident mediation            | 2.75       | 2.77   | 2.89             | 1.52     | * p < .001 | Village > police > xiangxian, village > government > xiangxian |
| 9. Land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation | 2.96 | 2.42 | 3.06 | 1.49 | * p < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 10. Community safety maintenance      | 2.61       | 3.38   | 2.64             | 1.34     | * p < .001 | Police > village > xiangxian, police > government > xiangxian |
| Overall                              | 26.43      | 23.69  | 31.51            | 17.78    | * p < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |

* > Means greater than or larger than
Previous studies of Chinese disputes or conflict resolutions suggest that forms of mediations are associated with types of disputes (Jiang & Wu, 2015; Jiang et al., 2021; Michelson, 2007). In 1985, Albert Hunter proposed that three levels of social orders—the private, the parochial, and the public—are “arrayed along a continuum of decreasing affect or sentiment” (Hunter, 1985, p. 232). The private order is largely grounded in sentiment, the parochial is intermediate in terms of sentiment, and the public is grounded in the formal state agencies with the least sentiment. Based on Hunter’s classification, Bursik and Grasmick (1993) suggested three levels of social control: the private, the parochial, and the public. Private control is grounded in intimate groups such as family and friends. Parochial control is manifested in broader social network groups such as community or neighborhood organizations. Public control is related to formal control but focuses “on the ability of the community to secure public goods and services that are allocated by agencies located outside the neighborhood” (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993, p. 17). Although a village committee in China is clearly marked by the government, ideas from Hunter (1985) and Bursik and Grasmick (1993) are helpful to link the types of disputes to different forms of social control.

As discussed before, village committee members come from the community. They have natural connections with fellow villagers so that they can use personal relationships to mediate disputes. On the other hand, they are expected to maintain village order on behalf of the local government. Thus, as a semiformal organization, a village committee has advantages to deal with disputes within a village, compared to either formal organizations such as police and other government agencies or informal groups/individuals such as xiangxian. Limited empirical studies revealed that when disputes occur among villagers and between villager and village, the village committee, rather than government agencies or the criminal justice system, is the more frequent mediator (Michelson, 2007) and has a higher participation level than other control mechanisms (Jiang et al., 2021). Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

1. Disputes within a village are more likely to be mediated by a village committee than other control mechanisms.

   When disputes proceed beyond a village, village committees are expected to, and in fact do, frequently mediate. However, the committee must work with government entities to mediate the disputes. Meanwhile, the local government is responsible for mediating disputes beyond a village. But the local government regulates many geographically widespread villages and government officials often lack personal connections with villagers. As a necessity and a tradition, the local government works with village committees to mediate disputes between villagers and government and to mediate villagers’ appeals to higher level governments. Thus, we hypothesized that:

2. As for disputes beyond a village, the government and village committee have an equal likelihood to mediate them; and each of them is more likely than police and xiangxian to mediate the disputes.

   When a dispute escalates to a law-violating behavior or when a criminal behavior occurs in a village, the police get involved. Although they often work with the village committee to prevent and control law-violating behaviors, the police are expected to be and in fact are the major control mechanism. Thus, we hypothesize that:

---

1 Please note that although Bursik & Grasmick (1993) distinguish between private and parochial controls, they both are informal control.
3. Law-violating behaviors are more likely to be controlled by police than other control mechanisms.

The discussions of the three different types of village order maintenance issues above imply that if each hypothesis (hypotheses 1 to 3) is empirically supported, for one type of village order maintenance issues, different control mechanisms may have different frequencies of mediation or control action. Furthermore, previous studies found that different types of disputes are associated with different types of control mechanisms (Jiang & Wu, 2015; Jiang et al., 2021; Michelson, 2007). Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

4. The participation frequencies of the four control mechanisms differ for each type of community order maintenance activities.

Findings from an empirical study conducted by Jiang et al. (2021) suggested that the frequency of participation of each control mechanism in addressing village order maintenance issues is positively related to its importance. It makes sense to us that the more times a control mechanism in a community order maintenance issue is observed by a respondent, the more likely the respondent would view it as important. In this study, we also assumed that the frequency of participation of each control mechanism in addressing village order maintenance issues is positively related to its importance. By analogy, we developed the following hypotheses regarding the importance of control mechanisms in village order maintenance.

5. Compared to other control mechanisms, a village committee is expected to play a more important role in mediating disputes within a village.

6. For mediating disputes beyond a village, a village committee and government entity are expected to play an equal role; and each of them is expected to play a more important role than police and xiangxian.

7. For preventing and controlling law-violating behaviors, police are expected to play a more important role than other control mechanisms.

8. It is expected that the importance rankings of four control mechanisms differ for each type of community order maintenance activities.

Methods

Questionnaire

Data in this study came from a major survey project organized by a highly regarded, university research center in Hubei province, China, that focuses on rural China. The center has conducted surveys of villages nationwide every year since 2006 except in 2020. In 2021, the survey includes two levels: the village and the individual. Both village and individual questionnaires include a basic data section pertaining to socioeconomic data and eight theme-specific sections collecting opinion-based data. Village governance is one of the eight themes from where the prevalence and importance of forms of social control data were extracted. The entire survey including the eight themes was reviewed and approved by the university authority—the Chinese equivalent unit of an institutional review board.

The basic data section questions were based on the center’s previous surveys. The village governance questions were selected based on the literature review by the theme survey organizer who has published papers on social governance. The organizer had organized previous surveys in China and has collaborated with international scholars. The final
version of the village governance questionnaire was developed based upon pretests with input from some of those selected to conduct interviews and villagers.

**Samples and Interviewers Selection**

Interviewers in this study met the following criteria and considerations. First, candidates were graduate students who had completed a research methods course or had previous experience administering surveys. Their academic knowledge, combined with survey training or experience, was beneficial in conducting face-to-face surveys. Second, candidates must have parents or relatives living in the countryside. Thus, those chosen as interviewers could return home to celebrate Chinese New Year (February 12, 2021), the most important holiday in China, with their parents/relatives and conduct the survey conveniently during the same time period. The Chinese countryside is still an acquaintance society. With a countryside background and acquaintance with their parents’ or relatives’ village, they could go back home and access village leaders and fellow villagers. Importantly, village fellow status is exceedingly helpful to successfully disseminate a survey on social control. Even though written Chinese is the same, China has many local spoken dialects. People with different dialects may not understand each other at all. Villages may have very different customs and norms as well. Sharing the same dialects and culture is essential for mutual understanding during the survey process. It is also helpful for an interviewer to check whether a respondent provided accurate information.

All the interviewers were trained by experienced professors from the center. Training included the purpose of the survey, survey requirements, survey guidelines, and payment of a stipend for distributing the survey. During the training, all the interviewers were required to familiarize themselves with the survey questions. To help improve the survey quality, all the interviewers and the survey organizers joined a survey group on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media app, for communication until the completion of the survey. The surveys were conducted during the students’ winter break in 2021—between January and February. The data collection method was face-to-face survey interviews. The in-person interview was important to improve survey quality because many respondents in the countryside have little formal education. Each interviewer was expected to interview 15 villagers for the individual questionnaires and one villager leader for the village questionnaire. A total of 164 villages (or village leaders) were interviewed and 2,460 individual surveys were expected. A total of 2,343 completed questionnaires at the individual level were collected, a response rate of 95%, and 164 completed village surveys were collected.

**Variables**

Major variables in this study were the prevalence and importance of four control mechanisms in 10 village order maintenance activities. A general meaning of prevalence is that a phenomenon or action occurs commonly. In this study, prevalence refers to the operations of four control mechanisms as reflected in the frequency of participation of organizations or groups in community order maintenance activities. It was measured by this question: “Which organizations or groups participated most frequently in the following 10 village order maintenance activities? (the most = 4, the second most = 3, the third most = 2, and the least = 1).” This is a matrix question (see Table 5 in Appendix). Organizations and groups we include are township government and higher level government, paichusuo (or community police), village committee, and xiangxian (or the elite gentry or respected
people, not including current village leaders). Government and police are two indicators of formal organizations and village order maintenance activities conducted by them are considered formal social control. Xiangxian is the indicator of informal social control. The village committee is a measure of semiformal social control.

Table 1 lists all the prevalence measures. The 10 activities are (1) family dispute mediation, (2) house property dispute mediation, (3) villager dispute mediation, (4) villager vs. village committee dispute mediation, (5) villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation, (6) villager vs. government dispute mediation, (7) villager shangfang (appealing to higher level government) mediation, (8) quntixing shijian (mass incident) mediation, (9) land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation, and (10) community safety maintenance such as preventing and controlling crime, violence, and drug abuse.

As for importance, each of the four control mechanisms above was evaluated on its importance in each of the above 10 activities shown in Table 2. The answer categories for each question were very important (= 5), important (4), between important and not important (= 3), not important (= 2), and not important at all (= 1).

**Findings**

Table 1 presents results on the prevalence of four control mechanisms in 10 village order maintenance activities based on the mean scores. Results from ANOVA tests in the table indicate whether participation in each of the 10 activities and overall activities varies among the four control mechanisms. Results from post hoc tests further indicate which control mechanism is the most prevalent and which one is the least.

Table 1 shows that for each of the 10 activities and overall activities, government, police, village committee, and xiangxian have different frequencies of participation. For all the activities, except law-violating behavior prevention and control, the village committee had the highest frequencies of participation. To be more specific, for the five dispute items within a village—family dispute mediation, house property dispute mediation, villager dispute mediation, villager vs. village committee dispute mediation, and villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation—the village committee participated more frequently than any other three control mechanisms. These findings provide support for hypothesis 1.

---

2 In order to directly test the application of social disorganization theory to China, several studies (Zhang et al., 2007; Jiang et al., 2013, Messner et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2017) included “collective efficacy,” a combination of shared willingness of residents in intervening community disorder behaviors (or informal social control) and social cohesion and trust. This study does not aim at a direct test of the application of social disorganization theory in rural China. Its purpose is to investigate how prevalent and important different forms of control are in social order maintenance. Thus, the study does not measure collective efficacy but focuses on informal social control. When designing the survey, the research team discussed to use a similar measure of informal social control as that used by the above studies in urban China. However, Chinese experts in rural society research believed that the items used to measure informal social control or shared willingness by Sampson et al. (1997) or the above studies of urban China are not the best way to measure informal social control in the countryside. First, spray-painting graffiti on a local building was almost unheard in rural China. Second, there are very few fire stations in rural areas. Third, many villages do not have streets at all so that the item of children hanging out on a street corner is not applicable. Fourth, children’s disrespect to an adult and fighting in front of a villager’s house are sparse in the countryside (Su, 2021; Wang, 2015). They recommended Xiangxian’s participation in village order maintenance activities listed in this study as a measure of informal social control in rural China because they, relative to average villagers, play a more important role in community order maintenance traditionally (Huang, 2008) and today (Wu, 2020). Today’s xiangxian includes educated people, successful businessmen, retired village leaders, the Party members, kin leaders, and other respected people.
Table 2  Prevalence of four control mechanisms using mechanisms as categories (mean score)

| Village order maintenance activities | Government | Police | Village committee | Xiangxian | ANOVA | Post hoc tests |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------|-------------------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| Within-village dispute mediation      | 2.40       | 2.12   | 3.36              | 2.06      | $p < .001$ | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| Beyond-village dispute mediation      | 2.96       | 2.43   | 3.01              | 1.53      | $p < .001$ | Village > police > xiangxian government > police > xiangxian |
| Crime control                        | 2.61       | 3.38   | 2.64              | 1.34      | $p < .001$ | Police > village > xiangxian police > government > xiangxian |
that disputes within a village are more likely to be mediated by the village committee than other control mechanisms. For the 4 dispute items beyond a village, the village committee had the highest frequency of participation in the mass incident mediation (item 8) and the land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation (item 9); the village committee and government participated equally in the villager vs. government dispute mediation (item 6) and the villager appealing to higher level government mediation (item 7) more frequently than police and xiangxian. These findings provide support for the part of hypothesis 2 that the village committee is more likely than police and xiangxian to mediate the disputes beyond a village. Results from item 10 (community safety maintenance such as preventing and controlling crime, violence, and drug abuse) provide support for hypothesis 3 that law-violating behaviors are more likely to be intervened or controlled by police than other control mechanisms.

Results from Table 1 also appear to indicate that the participation frequencies of four control mechanisms vary as types of order maintenance activities change. In order to test their association, we created three types of activities. Within-village type resulted from the average of first 5 items in Table 1, beyond-village type was formed from the average of 4 items, 6 to 9 in Table 1, and law-violating behavior control is directly from item 10 in Table 1. Table 2 presents the results regarding whether four control mechanisms differ for each type of activities. Results from the ANOVA tests in Table 2 support hypothesis 4 that the participation frequencies of four control mechanisms differ for each type of community order maintenance activities. Furthermore, for the participation in dispute mediation within a village, the village committee was more prevalent than all other control mechanisms, which confirms the findings in which each of the 5 within-village dispute mediations was used as a variable in Table 1. For the participation in dispute mediation beyond a village, village committee and government had the same frequency but were more prevalent than police and xiangxian, which is consistent with the findings in which each of items 6 to 7 was used as a variable but inconsistent with the findings in which each of items 8 and 9 as a variable in Table 1.

Table 3 presents the findings on the importance of village committee, government, police, and xiangxian in village order maintenance activities based on mean scores. The 10 order maintenance activities in Table 3 are the same as those in Table 1. ANOVA was used to test whether four control mechanisms had different importance rankings in each of the 10 activities and overall activities. Post hoc tests were used to examine which control mechanism is more or less important in each of the 10 activities and overall activities. Results from ANOVA tests in Table 3 show that four control mechanisms had different importance rankings in each of the 10 activities and overall activities. Furthermore, for all within-village activities—family dispute mediation, house property dispute mediation, villager dispute mediation, villager vs. village committee dispute mediation, and villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation—village committee was ranked more important than other three control mechanisms. These findings support hypothesis 5 that compared to other control mechanisms, village committee is expected to play a more important role in mediating disputes within a village. Results for beyond-village activities (items 6 to 9 in Table 3)—villager vs. government dispute mediation, villager appealing to higher level government mediation, mass incident mediation, and land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation—show that government ranked more important than village committee and other two control mechanisms. These findings do not support hypothesis 6 that for mediating disputes beyond a village, a village committee and government entity are expected to play an equal role; and each of them is expected to play a more important role than police and xiangxian. Results regarding law-violating behavior control (item 10 in Table 3) show that police played a more important role than government, village
Table 3 Importance of four control mechanisms (mean score)

| Village order maintenance activities | Government | Police | Village committee | Xiangxian | ANOVA | Post hoc tests* |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------|-------------------|-----------|-------|-----------------|
| 1. Family dispute mediation           | 3.58       | 3.51   | 4.09              | 3.70      | * < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 2. House property dispute mediation   | 3.82       | 3.52   | 4.16              | 3.40      | * < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 3. Villager dispute mediation         | 3.66       | 3.63   | 4.09              | 3.50      | * < .001 | Village > government > informal village > police > xiangxian |
| 4. Villager vs. village committee dispute mediation | 3.94   | 3.53 | 4.07              | 3.35      | * < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 5. Villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation | 3.98 | 3.53 | 4.06              | 3.20      | * < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |
| 6. Villager vs. government dispute mediation | 4.15 | 3.60 | 3.99              | 3.12      | * < .001 | Governance > Village > police > xiangxian |
| 7. Villager shangfang mediation       | 4.17       | 3.65   | 3.96              | 3.10      | * < .001 | Governance > Village > xiangxian |
| 8. Mass incident mediation            | 4.10       | 4.01   | 4.00              | 3.14      | * < .001 | Governance > Village > xiangxian governance > police > xiangxian |
| 9. Land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation | 4.12 | 3.77 | 4.00              | 3.04      | * < .001 | Governance > Village > police > xiangxian |
| 10. Community safety maintenance      | 4.03       | 4.37   | 3.84              | 2.95      | * < .001 | Police > governance > Village > informal |
| Overall                               | 39.57      | 37.10  | 40.25             | 32.46     | * < .001 | Village > government > police > xiangxian |

The ten items in the table are from this question: Please rank importance of government in the following village order maintenance activities: (1) family dispute mediation, (2) house property dispute mediation, (3) villager dispute mediation, (4) villager vs. village committee dispute mediation, (5) villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation, (6) villager vs. government dispute mediation, (7) villager shangfang (appealing to higher level government) mediation, (8) quntixing shijian (mass incident) mediation, (9) land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation, and (10) community safety maintenance such as preventing and controlling crime, violence, and drug abuse. Answer categories: not important at all ( = 1), not important ( = 2), between not important and important ( = 3), important ( = 4), very important ( = 5). This same question was also asked for evaluating the importance of police, village committee, and xiangxian, respectively. * > means greater than or larger than
committee, and xiangxian, which provides support for hypothesis 7 that as for preventing and controlling law-violating behaviors, police is expected to play a more important role than other control mechanisms.

The results above in Table 3 imply that the importance of four control mechanisms may differ for types of community order maintenance activities. As we did for prevalence, we created three types of activities and ran the ANOVA tests to investigate whether the importance of four control mechanisms varies for each type of activities. Table 4 present the findings. A visual inspection of results in Table 4 reveals that for each type of activities, different control mechanisms ranked differently, which provides support for hypothesis 8 that the importance rankings of four control mechanisms differ for each type of community order maintenance activities. Furthermore, for within-village dispute mediations, village committees played a more important role than government, police, and xiangxian. For beyond-village dispute mediations, the government was more important than other control mechanisms. For law-violating behavior control, the police were the most important.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using quantitative analysis, this study further confirms the previous research findings that semiformal organizations—village committees and semiformal control implemented by village committees—are prevalent and important in maintaining community order. Overall, semiformal organizations are more prevalent and important than formal control mechanisms such as government and police and informal control mechanisms such as xiangxian. Furthermore, the relative prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations and control are associated with types of social order maintenance activities. For within-village dispute mediations, the village committee participated more and was more important than government, police, and xiangxian. For beyond-village dispute mediations, the participation frequencies of village and government were similar and more frequent than police and xiangxian; however, the importance of government was higher than was the village committee as well as police and xiangxian. In preventing and controlling law-violating behaviors, police played a more central role than the other three control mechanisms. Finally, government, police, village committee, and xiangxian participated differently and had different importance rankings in three types of activities, respectively.

Two issues are worth further discussion. First, the literature clearly suggests that semiformal organizations such as village committees are created, imposed, and supported by the Chinese government but are still grassroots organizations. They are not government agencies but carry out official duties. They work with both government/governmental agencies and society/citizens and they are the bridge between government and society. Semiformal control from semiformal organizations is both prevalent and important. This study provides quantitative evidence showing the prevalence and importance of semiformal organizations in mediating within-village and beyond-village disputes and preventing law-violating behaviors in rural China. In turn, this study suggests the architecture of a trinary (formal, semiformal and informal) control system in China is clearly different from a binary (formal and informal) control system in the West.

Second, the prevalence of semiformal control and the difference between a binary control system and trinary control system have an implication for testing the generalizability of existing criminological theories. As noted before, within the social disorganization theory, a lack of informal social control is a key factor explaining the connection between structural disadvantage and crime in neighborhoods in the West (Silver and Miller, 2004; Zhang et al., 2017). Under the
Table 4 Importance: type of dispute mediation vs. four control mechanisms using mechanisms as categories (mean score)

| Village order maintenance activities | Government | Police | Village committee | Xiangxian | ANOVA     | Post hoc tests                                      |
|--------------------------------------|------------|--------|-------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Within-village dispute mediation      | 3.80       | 3.54   | 4.09              | 3.43      | $p < .001$ | Village > government > police > xiangxian            |
| Beyond-village dispute mediation      | 4.14       | 3.76   | 3.99              | 3.10      | $p < .001$ | Government > village > police > xiangxian            |
| Crime control                        | 4.03       | 4.37   | 3.84              | 2.95      | $p < .001$ | Police > government > village > xiangxian            |
context that semiformal social control from semiformal organizations such as residents’ committees and village committees is more prevalent than informal social control in China, can informal social control still play a primary role in containing neighborhood crime rates?

Several studies quantitatively test the application of social disorganization theory to Chinese urban societies, including the role of informal social control (Jiang et al., 2013; Messner et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2017).\(^3\) Zhang et al. (2007) investigated the effect of three forms of social control on self-reported victimization of household burglary within the last 5 years in Tianjin, a first-tier city near Beijing. Findings from that study suggest that formal control (or public control in their words) appears to be the strongest, informal control (or collective efficacy) the second, and semiformal control (or semi-public control in the authors’ words) the least. Jiang et al. (2013) tested the effect of satisfaction with police (an indicator of formal control), social ties, collective efficacy, and semiformal control (measured by the importance of neighborhood mediation committee in maintaining community order) on the perception of neighborhood property crime in Guangzhou, a first-tier city near Hong Kong. They found that both semiformal control and informal control are statistically significant at \(p < .05\) while formal control is not statistically significant. A study conducted by Messner et al. (2017) examined the effect of different control mechanisms on respondent-reported household property victimization during 12 months in Tianjin. According to the findings from the study, semiformal control (measured by *tiao-jie* and *bang-jiao*) appears to have a stronger effect on the dependent variable than public control and informal control (measured by collective efficacy and neighborhood watch). Another recent study conducted by Zhang et al. (2017) investigated the connection between types of social control and perceptions of crime and disorder in Tianjin. They found that collective efficacy as a form of informal control is a predictor of perceived social disorder. Formal control (or public control) has a significant effect on perceived criminal activity, social disorder, and physical disorder and semiformal (or semi-public) control also significantly affects these types of disorder.

Without question, these studies give us some insights about the role played by the three forms of social control in containing deviance and crime in China’s urban areas. However, their findings on the effect of formal, semiformal, and informal social control are inconsistent. This inconsistency may be due to different measures of the dependent variable. It may also result from different measures of the three forms of control. In addition, all four studies gathered data from cities. China still has a large proportion of rural population. The current study found that semiformal social control is more prevalent and important than informal social control but did not directly test any Western criminological theories. It is clear that more research is needed to examine the application of social disorganization theory and the importance of informal social control in China, with its own distinct culture.

Readers need to consider the findings from this study with caution. First, although our sample is nationwide, it was not randomly selected. Thus, we cannot claim the representativeness of the sample for the nation. Second, this study focuses on the countryside only and was not designed for the urban population. As in other nations, there are differences between rural and urban areas in China in terms of economic development, community resources, social mobility, and cultural diversity (Irwin et al., 2016). Findings drawn from this study cannot be statistically generalized to the urban areas. In addition, this study focuses on the prevalence and importance of semiformal control with a comparison to other forms of control in social order maintenance activities and the correlation between forms of social control and types of

---

\(^3\) He and Messner (2020) review more studies that are related to the application of social disorganization theory to Chinese urban societies. Only four of the reviewed studies listed here have directly test the theory using similar measures of informal social control as Sampson et al. (1997) did.
activities. It neither empirically investigates the predictors of the prevalence and importance of semiformal control and other forms of control nor the impact of semiformal control and other forms of control on order maintenance activities such as dispute mediations and crime rates. Future research is needed in these areas. Research on the predictors of the prevalence and importance of semiformal control and other forms of control would help us understand the reasons why semiformal control is most frequently used and has the most importance in community order maintenance compared to formal and informal forms of social control. Studies on the impact of semiformal control and other forms of control on order maintenance activities would inform us about whether a form of social control is effective in community maintenance activities. If effective, these studies can further tell us about what kind of effects each form of social control would have and which form of social control has a stronger effect. Without the effectiveness assessment, research on forms of social control and community order maintenance is incomplete.

Nonetheless, the current study advances the existing literature in several ways. It systematically reviews the descriptions of semiformal organization and semiformal control. The study found that overall, semiformal control is the most prevalent and important in village order maintenance. Village order maintenance uses a trinary control system rather than a binary control system. Furthermore, forms of social control are associated with types of village order maintenance activities. Although overall semiformal control is the most prevalent and important, specific village order maintenance activities may change the participation frequencies and importance rankings of different forms of control. Additionally, one specific form of control may have different participation frequencies and importance rankings among different types of activities. All these advances are meaningful for developing the semiformal social control theory. They are also meaningful for testing the generalizability of existing criminological theories such as social disorganization theory.

These advances also have practical implications especially in rural China. First, China has long stressed the cooperation among formal organizations such as local government and police, semiformal organizations such as village committees, and informal groups such as xiangxian in community affairs but lacks quantitative data on how often each form of social control mechanisms participates in village order maintenance activities. Findings from this study provide survey information on this aspect. Thus, decision makers in rural China can use these findings along with their experience to make evidence-based improvements such as increasing or decreasing the frequency of a form of social control. Second, although the governing authority in China may act upon the different forms of social control playing important roles, they may not rely on precise, quantitative information on the importance of the four control mechanisms in different types of community order maintenance actions. Given the findings from this study, they can develop relevant policies and adjustments accordingly. For example, since the village committee plays a more important role in mediating within-village disputes, the government may allocate more resources to strengthen the village committees and rely on them to solve this type of problems. Also, since community policing is the most important method in dealing with law-violating behaviors, government should encourage village committees and xiangxian to work with community police for crime control. Finally, the findings of the connections between forms of social control and types of village order maintenance activities in this study inform decision makers that the improvement of the prevalence and importance of a social control mechanism in community order maintenance should be activity/issue-specific. For example, it may be necessary to increase the frequency of police participation in preventing or controlling law-violating behaviors but may be not necessary to do so for neighborhood minor disputes since village committees or xiangxian are in a better position to mediate them.
Appendix A

Table 5

The question used to measure the prevalence of four control mechanisms: Which of the following organizations or groups participates in the following activities most frequently (the most = 4, second most = 3, third most = 2, and the least = 1)?

| Activities                                                                 | Government | Police | Village committee | Xiangxian |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|--------|-------------------|-----------|
| ① family dispute mediation                                                |            |        |                   |           |
| ② house property dispute mediation                                        |            |        |                   |           |
| ③ villager dispute mediation                                              |            |        |                   |           |
| ④ villager vs. village committee dispute mediation                        |            |        |                   |           |
| ⑤ villager vs. village-owned economy dispute mediation*                   |            |        |                   |           |
| ⑥ villager vs. government dispute mediation**                             |            |        |                   |           |
| ⑦ quntixing shijian (mass incident) mediation***                          |            |        |                   |           |
| ⑨ land expropriation and housing demolition dispute mediation             |            |        |                   |           |
| ⑩ community safety maintenance such as preventing and controlling crime, |            |        |                   |           |
| violence, and drug abuse                                                 |            |        |                   |           |

Many Chinese villages have their own companies that hire villagers. The company-villager disputes may occur in work assignment, promotion, salary payment, and others

** China establishes a letter and visit system and allows citizens to complain to higher level governments about their disputes or conflicts with local authorities including village committee. However, although accepting appeals and complaints, higher level governments do not want to have too many such petitions. Thus, they encourage local authorities especially township government and village committee to mediate the disputes and try to resolve the disputes at the village level or the township level

*** A mass incident in China refers to a contention or protest that involves 5 or more people for “a better bargain with the state on specific socioeconomic issues” (Gui, 2014, p.1). On the one hand, this type of protests reflects problems in reforming China so that the state is willing to have a dialogue (or negotiation) with protesters and address their concerns. On the other hand, a mass incident can endanger societal stability so that the state tries to intervene at the first sign of possible trouble, thus nipping danger in the bud. Thus, mediation is often an approach used by local authorities such as township government and village committee to handle a mass incident in the countryside

Funding  This work was supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (20BZZ020).

Declarations

Ethics Approval  Yes

Informed Consent  Yes

Conflict of Interest  The authors declare no competing interests.

References

Bursik, R. J., Jr., & Grasmick, H. (1993). Neighborhoods and crime: The dimensions of effective community control. Lexington Books. https://doi.org/10.2307/2074915

Chen, X. (2004). Social and legal control in china: A comparative perspective. International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 48, 523–536. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X04265225

Gui, X. (2014). Handling of small-scale protests in china: Process dynamics and outcomes (Doctoral dissertation). Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Copenhagen.
He, D., & Messner, S. F. (2020). Social disorganization theory in contemporary China: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. Asian Journal of Criminology, 15, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-019-09291-2

Huang, P. C. C. (1993). “Public sphere”/“civil society” in China? The third realm between state and society. Modern China, 19, 216–240. https://doi.org/10.2307/189381

Huang, P. C. C. (1993). Between informal mediation and formal adjudication: The third realm of Qing civil justice. Modern China, 19, 251–298. https://doi.org/10.2307/189346

Huang, P. C. C. (2006). Civil adjudication in China, past and present. Modern China, 32, 135–180.

Huang, P. C. C. (2006). Court mediation in China, past and present. Modern China, 32, 275–314.

Huang, P. C. C. (2008). Centralized minimalism: semiformal governance by quasi officials and dispute resolution in China. Modern China, 34, 9–35.

Huang, P. C. C. (2019). Rethinking “the Third Sphere”: The dualistic unity of state and society in China, past and present. Modern China, 45(4), 355–391.

Hunter, A. (1985). Private, parochial, and public social orders: The problem of crime and incivility in urban communities. In G. D. Suttles & M. N. Zald (Eds.), The challenge of social control: Institutional building and systemic constraint (pp. 230–242). ABLEX.

Irwin, D., Zhang, D., & Wang, S. (2016). China’s social transformation and the development of rural community corrections. In J. Donnermeyer (Ed.), The Routledge International Handbook of Rural Criminology (pp. 419–428). Routledge.

Jiang, S., & Lambert, E. (2009). Views of formal and informal crime control and their correlates in China. International Criminal Justice Review, 19, 5–24.

Jiang, S., & Wu, Y. (2015). Chinese people’s intended and actual use of the court to resolve grievance/dispute. Social Science Research, 49, 42–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.07.009

Jiang, S., Lambert, E., & Wang, J. (2007). Correlates of formal and informal social/crime control in China. Journal of Criminal Justice, 35, 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjust.2007.03.003

Jiang, S., Wang, J., & Lambert, E. (2010). Correlates of informal social control in Guangzhou, China neighborhoods. Journal of Criminal Justice, 38, 460–469. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjust.2010.04.015

Jiang, S., Land, K., & Wang, J. (2013). Social ties, collective efficacy and perceived neighborhood property crime in Guangzhou, China. Asian Journal of Criminology, 8, 207–223. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-013-9167-1

Jiang, S., Zhang, D., Jin, X., Xiang, D., Greenleaf, R., Liu, J., & Xu, N. (2015). Semiformal crime control and semiformal organizations in China: An empirical demonstration from Chinese community corrections. Asian Journal of Criminology, 10, 287–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-015-9212-3

Jiang, S., Zhang, D., & Zhai, J. (2019). Semiformal control: A paradigm from Chinese society. Journal of Jiansu Police Institute, 34, 100–110.

Jiang, S., Zhang, D., & Irwin, D. (2021). Semiformal organizations and control during the COVID-19 crisis in China. Asian Journal of Criminology, 16, 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11417-020-09334-z

Martin, J. T. (2007). A reasonable balance of law and sentiment. Law and Society Review, 41(3), 665–697.

Messner, S. F., Zhang, L., Zhang, S. X., & Gruner, C. P. (2017). Neighborhood crime control in a changing China: Tiao-Jie, Bang-Jiao, and neighborhood watches. Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 54(4), 544–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427816682059

Michelson, E. (2007). Climbing the dispute pagoda: Grievances and appeals to the official justice system in rural China. American Sociological Review, 72, 459–485. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240707200307

Ministry of Civil Affairs (2021). Civil Affairs Statistics, 2021. Retrieved from http://www.mca.gov.cn/artilcle/sj/tjjb/2021/202101gjs.html. Accessed 2 July 2021.

National Bureau of Statistics of China (2021). Primary population data from the Seventh Census. Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202105/t20210510_1817176.html. Accessed 2 July 2021.

Sampson, R. J. (2006). Collective efficacy theory: Lessons learned and directions for future inquiry. In F. T. Cullen, J. P. Wright, & K. R. Blevins (Eds.), Taking stock: The status of criminological theory (pp. 149–167). Transaction.

Sampson, R. J., Morenoff, J. D., & Gannon-Rowley, T. (2002). Assessing “neighborhood effects”: Social processes and new directions in research. Annual Review of Sociology, 28, 443–478. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141114

Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. Science, 277 (August 15), 918–24.

Sheng, J., & Chen, Z. (2011). Social governance beyond law: Community mediation and informal social control. Journal of Shanghai Administration College, 5, 91–98.

Silver, E., & Miller, L. L. (2004). Sources of informal social control in Chicago neighborhoods. Criminology, 42, 551–583. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2004.tb00529.x
Su, H. (2021). Education urbanization and free public education in both urban and rural areas. *Education Studies, 10*, 35–44.

Tian, X. (2012). “Target responsibility system” in Shangfang governance: Practice logic and dilemma. *Society, (4)*, 164–193. https://doi.org/10.15992/j.cnki.31-1123/c.2012.04.003

Troyer, R. J. (1989). Chinese social organizations. In R. J. Troyer, J. P. Clark, & D. G. Rojek (Eds.), *Social control in the People’s Republic of China* (pp. 26–33). Praeger.

Wang, L. (2015). Li and Fa in China’s transitional countryside. *Chinese Social Sciences, 7*, 94–107.

Warner, B. D. (2007). Directly intervene or call the authorities? A study of forms of neighborhood social control within social disorganization framework. *Criminology, 45*, 99–129. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2007.00073.x

Wu, Y. (2020). China’s traditional xiangxian governance and its modern transition. *Qinhai Social Sciences, (4)*, 28–35. https://doi.org/10.14154/j.cnki.qss.2020.04.004

Zhang, Y., & Li, J. (2012). Making agreement: How does local government mediate citizens’ grievances? *Open Times, 7*, 5–25.

Zhang, L., Messner, S. F., & Liu, J. (2007). Bicycle-theft victimization in contemporary urban China: A multilevel assessment of risk and protective factors. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 44*, 406–426. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022427807305852

Zhang, L., Messner, S. F., & Zhang, S. (2017). Neighborhood social control and perceptions of crime and disorder in contemporary urban China. *Criminology, 55*(3), 631–663. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12142

Zhang, L., Zhou, D., Messner, S. F., Liska, A. E., Krohn, M. D., Liu, J., et al. (1996). Crime prevention in a communitarian society: Bang-jiao and Tiao-jie in the People’s Republic of China. *Justice Quarterly, 13*, 199–222.

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.