Community governance in rural villager resettlement neighborhoods in China: rural-urban divide, civic engagement, and state control

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Abstract. In China, to meet the demand of expansive urbanization, the state expropriates rural land from village collectives and offers resettlement arrangement to landless villagers. The aim of this study is to advance our understanding of the community governance in government-designated resettlement neighborhoods in Chinese cities. By employing participatory observations and key informant interviews with community association staff and resettled villagers in four neighborhoods in Shanghai, this research documents and evaluates an emerging multi-scalar civic coalition formed to maximize the capacity of community governance. The study finds that the new collation is maintained through strategic networks, information exchange, resource sharing, and reciprocal collaborations. Critiques of the regime spotlight its three shortfalls: the conflicts among regime partners which threatens the stability of the coalition; the justice issue behind differentiated standards that creates divides among community members; and the lack of citizen connection and support that questions the resilience of the regime.

1. Introduction

In China, urban lands belong to the state and rural lands belong to village collectives. To meet the demand for land to use in expansive urbanization, the state expropriates rural land from village collectives and offers compensation and resettlement arrangements to landless villagers. Land expropriation-induced resettlement (LEIR) has been an emerging state-sponsored land development practice for accommodating China’s fast-paced urbanization. Through land expropriation and resettlement, the central state sustains its ambitious urbanization agenda. Villagers’ uneasy post-resettlement urban integration also brings administrative challenges for the central and local states in supervising and accommodating this major societal transformation. The major challenge is how to assist villagers to truly become part of urban communities, not only in terms of formal status change from rural to urban, but also socio-cultural conversion through which villagers are reconstituted as urbanites. The analysis of community governance in LEIR neighborhoods, is, therefore, situated in the context of villagers’ life transformation, exploring how this complex process has restructured the power leverage and governance vision in resettlement neighborhoods. The new administrative challenges have fueled the formation of a multi-scalar governing coalition. This coalition-composed of community associations and sub-national supervisory government authorities-comes to the fore to maximize the capacity of
community governance in service delivery, regulation enforcement, civic engagement, conflict mediation, and most importantly, the management of villagers’ urban integration in resettlement neighborhoods.

The aim of this study is to advance our understanding of the community governance in government-designated resettlement neighborhoods in the state-sponsored urbanization in China. The empirical work was conducted in four resettlement neighborhoods located in suburban Shanghai. Opinions from neighborhood association representatives and resettled villagers unpack the fabric, features, and feasibilities of the new governing coalition in achieving designated institutional objectives and extending its capacity to fulfill non-routine tasks associated with villagers’ particular socio-cultural needs. The overarching questions guiding the case study are: who makes up the governing coalition? How does the coalition function? And what are the socio-political consequences of such coalition? The research findings provide valuable planning and policy insights for the management of state-led rural-to-urban resettlement in Chinese cities and other city regions undergoing similar societal transition.

2. Literature review

Two narratives have been applied to conceptualize the governance mechanism in China’s urban neighborhoods. The first narrative highlights the increasing bottom-up democratization through base-level social management in China’s urban communities [1, 6, 9]. The second narrative emphasizes the continuous infiltration of the central state in urban communities [5, 21].

Since the late 1990s, China’s urban communities have largely shifted the burden of public goods and services away from being the government’s responsibility. Increases in the community-based voluntarism, organizational membership, electoral participation, and activity involvement have provided strong evidence for the emergence of civil society—a potential public arena free from the state’s monopoly-in China’s urban neighborhoods. Li posited that the ultimate goal of China’s community governance is to construct or cultivate China’s civil society [8]. The empowerment of grassroots community associations and the proliferation of citizen engagement have combined to move forward the ongoing democratic consolidation of grassroots governance in contemporary China. While China’s Party authority has reached a consensus about the practical significance of relying on base-level community administrative systems [10, 13, 18, 22], the central government has never forsaken its influences in grassroots communities. The central leadership accentuates the fact that good governance cannot be achieved without a strong and effective state. Under such mentality, urban neighborhoods become the basic state units [5, 9, 19]. Neighborhood associations are seen as extensions of the Party-state’s territorial power over community affairs, through which the central authority is able to fortify its control-social absorption and institutional penetration from below-of the grassroots society [3, 19]. Since the 1990s, China’s central government has increasingly allocated resources and professionals to community governance institutions [12, 16]. Consequently, a wide range of organizations work as agents or partners in the provision of community services. This trend, nevertheless, does not mean a diminution of the power and influences of the state and local governance apparatuses, but rather signals a new model of community governance that allows different forms of partnerships and relationships between formal/structured governments and the voluntary/contractual sectors to negotiate with, back up, and be commentary to each other.

Regime theory gained its momentum in the mid-1980s when Clarence Stone documented the formation of a political regime-dominated by downtown business elites and local African political leaders-in Atlanta between 1946 and 1988 [15]. The word “regime” connotes different things, but in this research, it specifically refers to an “informal coalition of public and private interests working together to make and carry out governing decisions” (p.319) [4]. Regime theory is useful to explain the motivations and rationales of new governing coalitions in mobilizing strategic resources and solving non-routine governance problems [14]. A strong regime is expected to unite fragmented responsibilities and maximize the institutional accountabilities of each regime partner [2]. Regime theory provides a
new conceptual framework to explain China’s current planning and policy choices adopted in urban communities where speculative profit-driven governance approaches gradually give way to civic cooperation initiatives that aim to meet people’s particular social-cultural needs.

Informal arrangements in the process of cooperation are essential for an urban regime, as informal arrangements provide flexibility for a governing coalition to achieve non-routine governance objectives. Informality in an urban regime does not mean a lack of institutional connections among regime partners, but describes the condition of “bring together institutional connections [among the regime partners] by an informal mode of cooperation” [15]. Such mode of cooperation, defined by Stone as “civic cooperation” (p.5) [15], is motivated by purposive objectives and coordination of efforts, rather than overwhelmed structure of command. Empowered by informal arrangements, a governing coalition complements and bolsters the formal capacity to act. Reciprocity is a critical element for a structured set of relationships among regime partners, through which different interests are unified and facilitating actions are sustained. Like pluralists, regime theorists stress that the current political systems are not generally oligarchical, and the active citizenry does not constitute a single power elite [11,17]. Regime theorists also agree with the elitism theorists on acknowledging that certain groups play more privileged/dominant roles in decision-making processes. Nevertheless, regime theory changes the focus of the pluralist-elitist debate from the goal of “social control” to “social production” and from the regulative approach of “power over” to “power to” [7]. There is, of course, a point at which “power over” and “power to” merge, and a superior power to form a regime spills over into a trend of domination. But the essentiality of regime approach does not center on identifying any influential players, but rather on investigating the conditions, processes, and consequences of how partnerships are created and maintained in a reciprocal way.

3. Materials and methods

The research is mainly a Shanghai case study. On-site data collection and fieldwork were conducted from May to September in 2019. The empirical work combined participatory observations and key informant interviews with community association staff and resettled villagers.

The four selected LEIR neighborhoods are located in two suburban districts-Songjiang and Fengxian-in the southwest and south areas of metropolitan Shanghai. These four sampled neighborhoods represent two major types of resettlement neighborhoods. The first type specifically accommodates land-expropriated villagers (hereafter “Mono” type or sample). These neighborhoods are commonly close to pre-resettlement sites but far from urban centers. A large LEIR neighborhood in Songjiang District was selected to represent this type. The second type accommodates a mix of resettled villagers and commercial apartment buyers in existing residential areas (hereafter “Mix” type or sample). These neighborhoods are often closer to urban commercial and service centers. This type is represented by three adjacent resettlement neighborhoods in Fengxian District. In each neighborhood, approximately one-third of the residents are previous rural residents, from four nearby villages, whose lands were expropriated. Combining the three as one sample makes the mix type more comparable with the Mono one. The key informant interviews in this research collect opinions from staff members of major neighborhood associations and resettled villagers in the sampled neighborhoods. The 18 interviewed neighborhood association representatives, 10 representing the Mono type and 8 representing the Mix type, were recruited through purposive sampling after on-site institution visits. The 10 interviewed villagers, 4 representing the Mono type and 6 representing the Mix type.

4. Results and discussion

Three institutions-residents’ committees (RCs), homeowners’ associations (HOAs), and property management agents (PMAs)-form a “troika” that is responsible for major community regulative and service obligations in China’s urban neighborhoods. RCs are quasi-formal governance extensions of China’s Party-state authority over neighborhood affairs [3]. Employed by local governments, an RC
team (5-9 members) is in charge of community services such as regulation enforcement, employment consultation, dispute mediation, and event planning. Functioning as ‘pseudo-state’ grass roots organizations [20], RC members prepare regular work reports to corresponding supervisory government entities. An HOA, consisting 5-11 members, is the executive body of homeowners’ congress representing all homeowners within a neighborhood. Including HOAs in the community governance system has lessened the likelihood of property-based conflicts and promoted equity and transparency of service provision. Familiar with pre-resettlement conditions, HOA representatives serve as valuable resources for other regulatory forces to reach out and communicate with resettled villagers. Property management agents (PMA)—either owned by governments or companies—profit from providing community services. A property service contract is signed between a HOA and a PMA to specify service contents and liability concerns. While PMAs have wide latitude to set their own rules and fees, staff working in LEIR neighborhoods experience difficulties in collecting service fees from resettled villagers. It takes time for villagers to fully accept the idea of purchasing community services.

A “grid management system” has been operationalized in the research area. This newly established system functions as an effective tool for refining the managerial process in dealing with community affairs. When there is an emerging community case, neighborhood “grid managers”—commonly selected from RC members-assess and try to solve the issue. If grid managers cannot handle the issue, the case will be forwarded to a “Neighborhood Grid Working Station”. Staff of the station tackle the issue according to a list of responsibilities. If the problem still remains, the case will first be reported to and recorded by a “Street Office/Township Grid Center”, and then passed on to the corresponding township departments for another attempt at resolution. If the issue is still unresolved, the case will be submitted to and documented by a “District Grid Center”, and then sent to the district departments for further investigation. The grid management system seems to be a well-defined hierarchal network of social control, but in practice, the system is largely sustained through institutional relations based on solidarity, trust, and mutual support, rather than simply through hierarchy or bargaining. Regime partners—neighborhood-level regulatory forces and subnational government entities—are organically united by the grid system to assemble stable and long-running coalitions through shared civic institutions, exchanges, resources, and power. This coalition is not centered on immediate fixes of issues, but is oriented to facilitate social production and changes.

5. Conclusions
This case study adds new insight into the discussion by revisiting the role of the Party-state in community governance under a particular LEIR neighborhood context. Although the state has increasingly emphasized the necessity of public involvement, market influences, and base-level organizations in community governance, its authority is always dominant in China’s urban neighborhoods. The political infiltration in LEIR neighborhoods, nevertheless, has been achieved through subtle and tacit strategies by providing frameworks of references and strategic resources, rather than through overt and manipulative sanctions by imposing coercion or propaganda. Although neighborhood organizations receive state sponsorships, the economic dependency leads more towards social production than social control. Dealing with common governance challenges derived from villagers’ uneasy post-resettlement life transformation, the top-down command structure operationalized in conventional urban neighborhoods gives way to the civic cooperation that breaches the boundaries among the public, quasi-public, and private members of the regime. The new regime governing China’s LEIR neighborhoods is different from its Western counterparts considering the extensive state influence. Meanwhile, the regime is unique in China as such influence is executed in a fashion that is subtle, negotiable, and reciprocal.

In China, community as the basic unit of the state provides the most important platform of distributing public goods and social governances in the course of its transformation from receiving the overflowed social welfare from the work unit system to the basis of providing urban social security and
public service. Nevertheless, while providing venues for base-level democratization and multi-scale collaboration, communities are also place full of fragmentation, conflicts, and injustice. The civic cooperation-directed by formal structured, voluntary-based, and contractual-selected neighborhood associations and local supervisory authorities functioning at other levels of governance to whom the community is accountable-help villagers access appropriate advice, guidance, and expertise. The intertwined relationships, networks, and partnerships among the regime members extend the capacity of the coalition to quickly recognize conflicts and then precisely provide solutions. However, the current regime lacks resilience as it is concerned more with the process of interest group mediation among regime members than with the wider relationship between regulators and citizens. Negotiation and reconciliation are commonly practiced to achieve cooperative objectives and stabilize internal partnerships, rather than sustaining villagers’ long-term livelihood and wellbeing. While governmental authorities and grassroots community associations share resources, blend capacities, and extend institutional embeddedness, the regulatory coalition does not truly engage villagers in decision-making processes.

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