Abstract

In today’s China, the general transformation of the urban landscape goes with the invention of lifestyles. At the end of the 1990s, the work unit (danwei) system disappeared after progressive measures towards the marketization of state companies; nowadays the city is characterized by the separation of the workplace from the residence place. Following the “neighbourhood community building” (shequ jianshe) reform, the residents’ committee (jumin weiyuanhui) – the lowest level of urban administration – transforms and participates in the invention of local government. Hired and supervised by the urban administration, the residents’ committee employees are in charge of implementing public policies (household registry system, family planning, welfare programs), organizing cultural activities and mediating conflicts.

Based on ethnographic investigations in the Chinese city, this paper associates political theory and urban microsociology in order to grasp the dynamics of social interactions at the grassroots level, especially the relationships between municipality operators on the ground and the inhabitants in contrasted neighbourhoods in the city of Beijing.

The microsociological analysis consists in a field of experimentation in order to think more general issues, based on references to Foucault, Elias and Goffman. This flexible theoretical framework allows to study social configurations at the local level, and thus to shed light on lifestyles, speeches and social practices of urban daily life. Social control is much based on normalization processes; but various tactics of resistance also appear in conflicts which redefine the meaning of home-ownership and of the quality of life. This methodology offers perspectives on government “from below” in China. In spite of the apparent stable domination of the CCP and the perpetuation of the political regime, the reinvention of local government is a multiple, dynamic, paradoxical and uncertain process.

This ethnographic-inspired method aims at offering new perspectives on governmentality in urban China at the micro-local level where consistent changes happen in the context of the “neighbourhood community building” (shequ jianshe) reform. Moving away from the dominant paradigms in the Chinese studies, I adopted a more critical approach of the phenomena observed in China leading me to rethink a few conceptual and analytical tools, in order to study the complex socio-political reconfigurations in the city.

My starting point was the residential place, which is now disconnected from the workplace after two decades of gradual reform. The urban society appropriates the neighbourhood spaces, which are under the supervision of the local authorities and the work of the residents’ committee. This organisation strives at accompanying the residents' daily activities in many aspects. As the differentiation of the Chinese city goes with rapid urbanisation, the residents' committee must adapt
to different local contexts. The renewal of social control is much based on normalization processes; but various tactics of resistance also appear in conflicts which redefine the meaning of homeownership and of quality of life.

**Key words**

Beijing neighbourhoods; ethnographic inspiration; “neighbourhood community” (shequ); governmentality; biopower; public policy territorializing;

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Introduction

The residents' committee, an intermediate between the local administration and the inhabitants

In today's China, the general transformation of the urban landscape goes with the shaping of a plurality of lifestyles. At the end of the 1990s, the predominance of the work-unit (danwei) system faded in favour of a new organization of space and social activities characterized by the separation of the workplace from the residence place. In the context of the “neighbourhood community” (shequ) reform, the residents' committee (juweihui) – an organization under the lowest level of the urban administration system – transforms and participates in the definition of new forms of governmentality after the end of the danwei socialist system.

Due to its intermediary position between the local administration and the city inhabitants, the residents' committee constitutes an interesting organization: hired and managed by the local government, they are in charge of implementing public policies among which the household registry system (huji zhidu), family planning and birth control (jihua shengyu) and welfare programs. Their missions also include organizing cultural activities and mediating local conflicts in the neighbourhood.

The pluralization of urban life in urban China: implications for a critical theoretical framework

Grassroots organizations in urban China have been studied in Western academic research. Although many studies of the residents' committees and grassroots political organizations at the local level provide interesting facts, they rarely adopt ethnographic approaches. Now, an ethnographic investigation in local political life might contribute to understanding better the origins and evolutions of neighbourhood management. This article aims at filling a gap in the existing literature, by taking into account the recent evolutions in the urban environment and the new importance of the residence place for urban dwellers. How is the neighbourhood space organised on a daily basis in Beijing? The question might help to grasp the political and societal implications of the living place in the Chinese capital city. Trying to understand social life from below is a means to redefine previous conceptions of politics in China.

1 For a detailed account of neighbourhood life during the Cultural Revolution, see Martin K. Whyte, William L. Parish, Urban life in contemporary China, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.
2 See Benjamin L. Read's published articles about the residents' committees, but also about the mobilisations of homeowners in new residential compounds. There is indeed a growing interest for the analysis of home-ownership in urban China: among others, Luigi Tomba, “Residential space and collective interest formation in Beijing's housing disputes”, The China Quarterly, dec. 2005.
Concerning existing theories on the Chinese residents' committees and local policies in the cities, much of the published literature have adopted the concept of governance. The use of the “governance” paradigm in academic research originally spread from international organisations as the World Bank. In the last decades, the notion was much used in academic research to characterize what can be referred to as “strange” political systems, which may explain the recurrence of this term in many recent analyses of the Chinese society. For some researchers, the concept of governance denotes “the totality of processes and arrangements, both formal and informal, by which power and public authority are distributed and regulated”. The focus is clearly put on institutions and other established actors – “informal” meaning NGOs –, but it does not help clarifying social interactions and sensitive aspects, which also carry strong political implications.

Along with adopting an ethnographic perspective in political science, I found that the notions of “power” and “government” developed by Michel Foucault fitted better the data I collected and conveyed a more heuristic dimension. In Western countries, the interest for Foucauldian analyses in the field of Chinese studies has recently increased. Foucault's work is mainly used to focus on the authoritarian nature of the political regime with its mechanisms of control understood only in terms of repression. Another Foucauldian approach, more anthropological, has developed to analyse Chinese society through the neoliberal orientation of its politics and the emergence of a neoliberal self. My perspective differs from the above. In the last part of his research, Foucault offered a reflection on the individual and “self caring” (souci de soi). Following this idea, the individual remains the basic source of power exercise. In Foucault's analysis, power should not so much be interpreted in terms of lack as in terms of creativity: power produces more than it destroys. Therefore the theory of political power introduced by Foucault could fit an ethnographic perspective as it offers a precise definition of the state, seen as a result of multiple regimes of

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3 Many academics such as Vivienne Shue, Dorothy J. Solinger and Jude Howell debated on this concept at the “Provision of public services in modern China and changing modes of governance workshop”, University of Turku, August 12-14, 2009.
6 For a Foucauldian analysis of the Chinese city, see David Bray, Social space and governance in urban China: the danwei system from origins to reform, Stanford, 2005.
8 This Foucauldian notion is present in the last volume of The history of sexuality. In my opinion, it is only by reading The history of sexuality as a whole (the three books) that we can really understand the philosopher's point of view about power.
governmentalities\textsuperscript{9}. These governmentalities, which target a specific population, have effects on each individual and are produced by them as well. Since these different levels interact, why not experiment different scales of political analysis, starting from the lowest level?

Ethnographic enquiry offers a micro-sociological analysis of the new forms of governmentality in Beijing's urban neighbourhoods. Social order is maintained partly through the action of the residents' committees, who are in charge of administering many aspects of their residents' daily lives. Their specificity comes from the attempt to convince citizens to take part in public work, using not only official ways (official announcements in newspapers, and on the walls), but also many subtle strategies to obtain their cooperation (little gifts, individual face-to-face friendly invitations). The personality of the members constitutes an essential element of the process of their legitimization by the population.

That is why the social configurations of everyday life do not only appear in terms of institutionalized social control; they are also visible through the tactics of self-control or resistance produced by the individuals themselves. Ethnography in political science allows to set the focus not only on matters of domination by external entities, but also on how people create their own aesthetics of existence: lifestyles, techniques of the self, etc.

The recent evolutions of neighbourhood management underline the way public and social orders are being redefined in urban China. Ethnography is a way to shedding new light on lifestyles, discourses and social practices at the most local levels of residents' mobilisation in the Chinese city of Beijing.

\textit{Organization of the paper}

This paper is organised in five sections illustrating the interest of an ethnographic approach of authoritarian contexts in political science. All the examples are taken from my investigation logbook. It starts with a reflection on the methodology of ethnography in such contexts: how do you carry out ethnographic fieldwork in China when you are a foreign student? How does ethnographic investigation relate to political theory? How can we use these qualitative findings to shape more abstract concepts? The next four sections illustrate various aspects of the data I collected and the

\textsuperscript{9} “It is possible to suppose that if the state is what it is today, this is so precisely thanks to this governmentality, which is at once internal and external to the state – since it is the tactics of government that make possible the continual definition and re-definition of what is within the competence of the state and what is not, the public versus the private and so on. Thus the state can only be understood in its survival and its limits on the basis of the general tactics of governmentality”. Michel Foucault, ed. by James D. Faubion, \textit{Essential works of Michel Foucault (1954-1984)}, vol. 3 “Power”, New York, The New Press, 2000, p. 221.
analytical conclusions I drew from them on the government of urban neighbourhoods in Beijing. In the second section the paper presents the specific context of the Chinese city as it appears thanks to fieldwork data: in what ways do spatial structures help going deeper into social and political phenomena? Thirdly, we will focus on how ethnographic research on Beijing's residents committees shows that “neighbourhood community building” (shequ jianshe) reform constitutes a new paradigm in local government and public action. The fourth section offers analytical inquiries about the “power on life” which is at stake in the residential neighbourhoods. Finally, the results of in-depth interviews will help bring some light on the contradictions between discourse and practical experience.

I. A methodology of research inspired by ethnography: a constant interaction between social theory and fieldwork data

Adopting an interdisciplinary method, associating political theory and micro-sociology is a means to analyse more accurately the complexity of political phenomena. Ethnographic research on urban practices at the grassroots level allows to understand dynamic exchanges, such as the daily interactions between the numerous actors in the neighbourhood, and especially between the residents’ committees and the city inhabitants. Comparative politics at different levels (local, national, global) helps bring to light the strategies of social control implemented by the urban administration to supervise and monitor the citizens, as well as the conflicts between the different social forces in the redefinition of the competence of the state and the society in Chinese cities.

1. Political theory and fieldwork data: new perspectives on local political life in the Chinese city

As I mentioned above, I analysed the qualitative data collected during long-term fieldwork in Beijing in the light of concepts from Western schools of thought, with the constant concern of preserving a consistent theoretical framework. Foucault's dynamic definition of power adapts well to the Chinese political context. A critical approach of the binary concepts of “the public” and “the private”, “state” and “society”, allowed to question the paradox of social control and social welfare as a whole. By referring to European political philosophy in interaction with my fieldwork case

10 “In itself, the exercise of power is not a violence that sometimes hides, or an implicitly renewed consent. It operates on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself. It is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constraints or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being able of action. A set of actions upon other actions”. Ibid., p. 341.

11 I intend to follow Jean-Louis Rocca's approach, a French sociologist and political scientist who built a critical
studies, I might find new angles to question the socio-political implications of the neighbourhood in today's China and the micro-procedures of control and subjectification by the urban dwellers. This critical interpretation of “capitalism” and “modernity” is fruitful in the Chinese context: Chinese cities undergo a certain form of bureaucratic control, even though the work-unit system has declined. The family structure is partly supervised, conceived and promoted by state institutions (birth control policy). Nevertheless, city dwellers have now access to mechanisms of social and geographical mobility, giving way to the reinvention of lifestyles and social practices. Therefore, it is necessary to go beyond binary oppositions such as “tradition”/”modernity” and to criticize the “transition” paradigm, all of which are still much referred to in Chinese studies. Instead of pondering why China develops only economically and remains unchanged politically, we can wonder how the Chinese society works. In that perspective, ethnography can help carry out innovative research in political science.

The methodological tools of my research were subject to constant readjustment in order to fit a complex object – public policies – within a changing environment – the Chinese city. In order to discover the subtlety of a very different local environment and to experiment an anthropological approach of politics in China, the fieldwork I carried out in Beijing was inspired by an ethnographic method:

“For that purpose, the individual must be put back into his social setting and observed in his daily activities. In order to understand the spectacular event, it is necessary to see it in relation to the everyday pattern of life. The middle-class person looks upon the slum district as a formidable mass of confusion, a social chaos. The insider finds in Cornerville a highly organised and integrated social system.”

Urban sociology is interpreted in this article according to Goffman's analysis of daily interactions between people. Urban anthropology allows to understand more precisely the citizens' multiple engagements in the city, as well as the coherence of these engagements in defined social

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2. **Fieldwork in China: an ethnographic approach**

In order to grasp the complex interactions between social actors in Beijing's urban neighbourhoods, I identified different types of urban contexts where a residents' committee was in charge of the population living in the area. The fieldwork constituted in following the daily interactions between different agents (residents' committee members, residents etc) in different contrasted urban contexts in the city of Beijing, during two to six months in 2007, 2008 and 2009. The three grounds retained were respectively:

- one area located in the historical city centre, characterized by narrow lanes (*hutong*). A specific form of social organization lies in the collective life of many courtyard houses. Housing is still managed by the Housing Bureau (*fangguansuo*).

- one housing compound linked to work-units, built between the 1950s and the 1980s, under the supervision of the city administration. At first sight, the neighbourhood can be described as a working-class “village”. But in spite of the presence of long-term residents and close social ties, the local system changes rapidly.

- one recently developed neighbourhood, which can be referred to as a condominium (*juzhu xiaoqu*), located in the suburban area of Beijing. This type of urban housing is usually built by a real-estate developer (*kaifashang*) and managed by a professional company (*wuye guanli gongsi*).

I managed to get in touch with the employees of the residents' committees and with the residents of each neighbourhood. I was able to witness their daily interactions within the public space of the neighbourhood. In-depth interviews as well as direct and participatory observation proved very useful to study the multiple and often informal processes of power strategies directed toward the population and redefined by them. In addition to primary qualitative data, I looked into sources in Chinese language, especially academic articles and daily newspapers which provided useful information about the current debates concerning neighbourhoods and the policies practiced by the local authorities.

About the issue of carrying fieldwork in Beijing, it should be underlined that China is nowadays quite open to sociological research: sociology has redeveloped in China since 1979 and

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has become a major discipline in social sciences. The status of “foreign student” is often questioned by Chinese sociologists\textsuperscript{16}. Nevertheless, it constitutes a convenient identity when it comes to studying ordinary life: when I asked them about their daily life, urban dwellers were quite eager to answer, share their experience and inquire about the specificities of the two countries – France and China. The use of Chinese language really helped to reduce the gap between me – the “foreigner” (laowai/waoguoren) – and my interviewees. Moreover, the “young foreign student” image conferred a more relaxed atmosphere where my interviewees did not worry about what was at stake with my research. Most of them, especially the older people, simply felt proud and valued to be able to tell a young student about their experience. Finally, being a foreigner allowed me to grasp a few details that would not have been noticed by a Chinese observer. In fact, interviews proved to be almost similar to other countries, as long as the sociologist manages to set a genuine relationship with his/her interviewees. A few specificities still remain in the Chinese case. For instance, the use of the dictaphone is still difficult to accept among most Chinese interviewees. Some worried about the possible political consequences of the recording; others feared I might be a journalist undercover who published their testimony; but on the whole Chinese people are not used to this instrument and do not feel comfortable about it.

Taking these facts into account, I adopted a research methodology inspired by ethnography\textsuperscript{17}. By living in one of the neighbourhoods for two months during this fieldwork study, I was able to be seen as a “resident” and to experience local life facts from inside. Volunteering for the residents’ committee as an English teacher also gave me the opportunity to have access to their office and observe their daily activities. From this experience on, my presence in the neighbourhood was almost “natural”. I was always welcome by the residents' committee members and by the residents who attended my classes.

My methodology of research cannot pretend to reach the level of ethnographic urban inquiries such as those of William F. Whyte or Philippe Bourgeois\textsuperscript{18}, as I have not been able to spend enough time in each neighbourhood: in 2007/2008, the city of Beijing was getting ready for the Olympic Games, an event with direct consequences on the housing market\textsuperscript{19}. Moreover my presence as a “foreigner” still might have disturbed the scenes I witnessed, as a few residents' committee

\textsuperscript{16} Chinese researchers sometimes objected that a foreign student could not access the Chinese “authentic” way of living: “Chinese people will never tell you the truth”.
\textsuperscript{17} I hereby refer to the methodology of research defined by Marie-Laure Geoffray, French PhD, who carried fieldwork in Cuba.
\textsuperscript{19} I had a few difficulties with my Chinese visa procedures and when I decided to rent an apartment.
employees refused my interviews\textsuperscript{20}. Nevertheless, after my first visits on the sites, which caused much surprise and excitement, urban habits went rapidly back to “normal”.

II. Socio-political implications of neighbourhood governing in the Chinese city

In a country where the real-estate market was recently instituted, the new configurations of neighbourhood relationships and their quick evolution are studied through the multiple forms of local organization, especially the interactions between the residents’ committees and their population. By understanding the historical background of city life and its evolution, it becomes possible to link two apparently disconnected spheres: the economy of housing and the political domination in China.

1. Housing reform: the residence place becomes a matrix for a new local governmentality in the Chinese city

In the previous decades, housing in China was considered as a part of the social welfare provided by the state and allocated through the work-unit. In the 1980s, the reforms undertaken in the cities progressively commodified housing, allowing the work-units and professional promotion companies to develop the urbanisation of many areas, which contributed to the fast transformation of the structure of the Chinese city. Moreover, private property of housing became one of the main objectives for the central authorities; in the 1980s, the leaders believed that access to the property of housing would “impulse the nation’s economic growth”. In this perspective, the \textit{danwei} were allowed to sell the apartments to their occupants, according to an internal distribution principle. These persons got the opportunity to get access to home-ownership for preferential prices. Since the 2000s, housing has mainly become a commodity managed through the real-estate market. All the more so recently in metropolis cities like Beijing, where the preparation of the 2008 Olympic Games encouraged speculation in this sector\textsuperscript{21}. Therefore housing reform led to the emergence of home-ownership as a social norm, becoming the new standard of living for the Chinese middle class.

\textsuperscript{20} Most of these employees were afraid that my presence might bring them trouble with their upper-level administration. Others preferred me to first go through the official procedure of authorisation in order to accept my interviews and visits. But I did not choose to carry out fieldwork through the official channel because I was looking for a minimum of spontaneous answers from the residents’ committee members, and from the residents I met. I realised it was possible for me to carry out fieldwork in the neighbourhoods through more informal ways, such as by the intermediation of a friend who lived in the neighbourhood or simply by explaining to residents’ committee employees what my research constituted in.

\textsuperscript{21} As an example, in 2008, Beijing’s former vice mayor Liu Zhihua was sentenced to death penalty for taking bribes of more than six million yuan during his vice mayor term, from 1999 to 2006.
In architectural terms, the new housing model of the residential compound (xiaoqu) appeared after the liberalization of the housing policy. Today, urban space in China is characterized by multiple reconfigurations. A few areas in the historical city centre are undergoing huge mutation processes. Among them, “gentrification” has major consequences on the social structure of the historical neighbourhoods. Far from the city centre, suburban areas, originally under rural administration, are transformed by intense urbanization. Therefore, the Beijing area appears as very diffuse, characterized by various forms of housing.

To a certain extent, urban housing represents an element of social status in today's Chinese society. A new social category has emerged from the reform era: it is embodied by the people who have had access to the level of “small prosperity” (xiaokang). Their standard of living allows them to assume various expenses associated not only with basic needs, but also with consumption and lifestyle. The disconnection between the workplace and the residence place plays an important symbolic and material element in people's lives and leads to the re-appropriation of the residential space, carrying its own features. In a residential realm that isn't fully structured yet, patterns of subjectification take place, where people invent tactics in order to “protect their rights” (weiquan). The growing number of home-owners were more and more confronted to the real estate actors in conflicts due to contradictory interests. Their multiple attempts to get organized within the residences finally gave birth to a new organization, the home-owners' committee, which are elected in every newly built residential compound. This legal status, officially codified in 2007 in the Property law (wuquanfa) suggests the social legitimation of the new generation of home-owners.

2. The pluralization of urban society and the implementation of new ways of governing the population

In urban China, the system of the work-unit, which provided the employees with housing and social services (education for children, medical care, etc.) contributed to the building of a “cellular”22 society. In this respect, the integration of the residence place into the workplace limited the mobility of the population, already submitted to geographical control with the household registration system (huji zhidu). Created in the 1950s to supervise the individuals who were not employed in a work-unit, the residents' committee was then quite marginal in city dwellers' lives.

Important social changes in the reforms had visible consequences in the 1990s, among which the emergence of “social cleavages”23 in the Chinese society: urban unemployment, poverty, etc.

23 This was the notion introduced by Chinese sociologist Sun Liping. See Duanlie [Cleavage], Beijing, Shehui kexue
The authorities had to deal with these new issues now made public, all the more so as a growing population of migrant workers from the countryside started to come to the major cities. Nowadays, the urban landscape can no longer be based on the workplace. Lifestyles spread much further and invest new forms of sociability as well.

Finally, home-ownership represents a relatively recent experience, leading to new social interactions, among which many conflicts now emerge in the residential areas. In the newly developed xiaoqu, home-owners organise collective action by creating home-owners' associations, in order to defend their interests within the sphere of co-ownership. Moreover, the management companies directly provide the residence inhabitants with services (security, landscaping) by charging the home-owners with monthly fees. These companies are now in charge of several tasks that were originally under the residents' committees' responsibility.

Therefore, the social organisation and urban management of the local population is more and more complex. In these conditions, the notion of “neighbourhood community” (shequ) has emerged as a new way of governing city people: the territorializing of public action.

III. The “neighbourhood community building” (shequ jianshe), a new paradigm in the implementing of public policy strategies

The residents' committees' work illustrates how the city administration renews its tools of management by investing the neighbourhood as a new form of urban governmentality: the ethnographic approach makes it possible to analyse in which ways a theoretically non-political space – housing – supports a whole network of power relations.

1. The “neighbourhood community” (shequ), a new instrument of public policy

In studying the strategies and the tactics of government in the residence place, it appears necessary to consider first the Chinese term of “shequ”, officially translated as “community”\(^\text{24}\). In the last twenty years, Chinese urban authorities have been implementing public policies in the residential neighbourhoods under the new paradigm of the “neighbourhood community” (shequ). The invention of the “neighbourhood community” paradigm is the result of a redefinition of public policy making. Since the urban reform of 1984 in China, experiments have been made in several cities, in order to improve urban management at the grassroots\(^\text{25}\). In 2000, the new policy published

\(^{24}\) In China, the uses and meanings of this term raise problems of definition and of translation. The notion of community can be translated in many ways: gongtongti, shequ.

\(^{25}\) For more information about this evolution, see David Bray, Social space and governance..., op. cit., p. 533.
by the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) officially introduced the notion of “neighbourhood community building” (*shequ jianshe*) as the new guideline of local management for the urban society in the entire country. According to the MCA, the notion of “*shequ*” is defined as “a social collective formed by individuals who live in a fixed area”. The missions of the *shequ* now focus on protecting the environment, providing education, being in charge of local politics, “grassroots democracy” and Party building.

This new reform policy in urban China presents a few common features with other countries in terms of neighbourhood management. It can be compared to the American case, first of all because Chinese official documents assert that their model of reform was based on and inspired by the United States. My own fieldwork results show that these two countries have indeed common social characteristics, for example in the way the residents' committees and local authorities promote moral values and appeal to the residents for volunteering. There are also common features with the French management system, taking into account the civic responsibility of the residents' committees and the development of social work in the neighbourhoods. But the specificity of the Chinese case lies in the fact that the residents' committees are more institutionalised, more focused on carrying out administrative tasks and more functionally developed than most grassroots initiatives in other countries.

2. **The transformation of the residents' committees in the context of the shequ reform: the professionalisation and technicisation of the residents' committees**

Following the promotion and development of the “neighbourhood community” (*shequ*), the residents' committees transformed along with the evolution of the urban society. They play a more important part in the administration of the city and its population.

Located at the heart of each neighbourhood and trying to keep up with a precise knowledge of the local situation, the residents' committee presents the paradoxical status of an “autonomous grassroots organisation for the masses” (*qunzhong zizhi zuzhi*) supervised by the local administration, the street office (*jiedao banshichu*) which finances the employees and orientates the general policies in the neighbourhood. Even if the residents' committee's status and missions were gradually codified by the “neighbourhood community building” (*shequ jianshe*) policy in 2000, the

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27 David Bray, *Social space and governance...*, *op. cit.*, p. 535.
28 In the French context, though, the strategy of reinvesting the neighbourhood as a new space of public action was closely linked to the problem of “sensitive neighbourhoods” or “sensitive suburbs”, which have given birth to the “politique de la ville”.
The official status of this organisation is still defined by the 1989 Organisational law. The unclear imbrication between past and present norms reinforces the ambiguity of this organisation. According to the 8th article of the Organisational Law, the members are elected by their residents every three years. But in practice, local elections follow a procedure previously established and approved by the local authorities. Moreover, the recent evolution shows that the local administrations launch recruitment campaigns for the residents' committee at the level of the district.

The residents' committees have been first institutionalised in 1954 in Chinese cities, but have been redefined in the context of the shequ reform. Their name has now changed to “neighbourhood community residents' committee” (shequ juweihui). Their new profile is characterized by the diversification of their functions as well as the technicisation and professionalisation of their structure. This evolution leads to a heterogeneous social composition among the employees. According to my interviews in Beijing, the residents' committee employees have a monthly wage between 1200 and 1800 yuan. Their salary varies according to their status and to the various processes of recruitment: some of them are part-time members, retired from their previous jobs, others took a more selective exam and became entitled as “neighbourhood community employees” (shequ gongzuozhe). The staff is no longer mainly constituted by older volunteers or unemployed (lao da ma). Beyond the differences from one neighbourhood to the other, the general tendency is that residents' committee employees are younger, more numerous and more qualified. Their present missions include executing official policies such as birth control, but also entertaining the neighbourhood, offering services and mediating local conflicts.

In older neighbourhoods located in the city centre, the residents' committees intervene in many aspects of the residents' daily life. But following the development of large-scale residential compounds in the suburban parts of Beijing, the question of a potential bureaucratization of this institution should be raised. The urban neighbourhood seems to become a source of legitimacy for the political regime. Therefore it is the place of multiples practices of government: from a collective point of view, it means governing a defined population; from an individual point of view, it means governing oneself through the “techniques of the self” (techniques de soi).
IV. Neighbourhood management: the territorializing of public action as a form of “power on life” in urban China

The diversification of the residents' committees allows us to understand the complex process giving birth to a reform and its consequences on the population. Chinese sociologist Sun Liping characterises it as the “transition (zhuanxing) from the work-unit man (danwei ren) to the societal man (shehui ren)”29. Ethnographic study of urban local life is a means of understanding better the way the Chinese state redefines its actions, especially how it influences the actions of the citizens themselves. These techniques of government have many ramifications, especially in the implementation of public policies.

1. Social control at the grassroots: the normalization of behaviours and public surveillance

How do residents define the residents' committee's work in their neighbourhood? According to many interviews, this organisation “deals with the residents' problems” (guan jumin de shiqing). This answer is very vague, as if the ambiguity lying behind this organisation and the diversity of its functions made it difficult to establish clear limits to its competences. The residents' committees intervene as information and service centres for their residents. But they also serve as official informers, since they know precise details about their population. They also cooperate with the local police in order to maintain public order. However, the question of security is also important in the residents' daily concerns, as my interviews confirmed it. Leisure is often a component of support campaigns for government policies. This reflects a diffuse and normative form of control, as a consequence of the biopower of the Chinese state30. The renovation of the techniques of communication combined to older forms of popular mobilisation contribute to orienting the animation of the neighbourhood towards a civic and moral education of the population. Moreover, the residents' committees introduce norms of “good behaviour”. The recurrence of the term “civilized” (wenming) illustrates this idea. Instead of following an oppressive method, social control at the grassroots is carried out by more subtle strategies, dealing with health, sanitary prevention, matrimonial well being.

Today, the government of the population within one geographically defined area appears under many strategies. Some of them mobilize informal relationships, others consist in supervising most socio-cultural activities at the local level. In Beijing, the residents' committees still cultivate

29 See chapter 7 in Sun Liping, Duanlie [cleavage], op. cit.
30 According to Foucault's definition, the notion of biopower refers to a specific type of power, which directly touches the people's lives, as it concentrates on questions of health and well-being.
personalized face-to-face contact with their residents. Their influence can grow thanks to an important personal investment in fieldwork and an efficient network of social relationships, criss-crossing multiple sources of information. However, as the ethnographic inquiry will further show, the majority of the population does not need to relate to this organization in order to manage their own life. By targeting the marginal categories of residents – the unemployed, the poor, the ill – the residents’ committee remains a marginal organisation governing marginal people.

2. **“Serving the residents” (wei jumin fuwu): the “softness” of local government**

Facing serious social challenges, the Chinese authorities try to reconquer the responsibility of several social fields, especially the question of welfare, which belonged to the work-units in the past decades. Following Jacques Donzelot's words, the Chinese state seems to be “inventing the social”\(^{31}\) as an object of public policy making in the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao era. “The state is gradually placing itself at the service of society”\(^{32}\). In other words, local government takes the form of “softness” as community work involves developing services and taking care of the “weaker”, more “vulnerable” categories of the population. The new paradigm of the shequ gives indeed a priority to the notion of “neighbourhood community services” (shequ fuwu), which means the development of individualized local services. The objective of social stability is reflected in the growing acknowledgement of the needs for well-being as expressed by the residents. The changing and sometimes contradictory subjectivities reveal a varied population, as well as a multitude of situations, lifestyles and daily experiences. The slogan of the new public policy, “serving the residents”\(^{33}\) (wei jumin fuwu) illustrates the process of moralization of the Chinese state: the development of social work aims at giving opportunities to the residents in difficult situations, but through a neoliberal approach: residents’ committee members council them more than they can find real solutions for them. The objective of political stability also leads to an attempt to offer mediation in locality-based conflicts and find solutions for unsatisfactory situations. But the complexity of most situations and the different interests at stake make compromises all the more difficult to find.

My fieldwork investigation in Beijing thus confirms that the residents' committee appears as a sort of local public service: everyone living in their limit of management can ask for their help or counseling. Their action within the neighbourhoods mainly aims at integrating a vulnerable or marginalized population (the retired, the handicapped, the unemployed etc.). Low-price local

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\(^{33}\) Which echoes to the famous “Serving the people” (wei renmin fuwu) by Mao Zedong.
activities (sport events, cultural out-goings) favour the participation of socially detached individuals such as the retired in need of sociability or the people without income. The recent creation of “neighbourhood community service centres” (shequ fuwu zhongxin) in each sub-district of Beijing, run by the street offices, confirms the importance of building poles of social and sanitary services. By actively contributing to implementing social work in the residential areas, the residents' committees try to prevent “disaffiliation” processes and social problems such as the ageing of the population.

3. Promoting the commitment of every individual in neighbourhood life

“Power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social”. By their direct contact on the field, the residents' committees incite the residents to participate to their action. The inhabitants still have the choice and may refuse any cooperation with their committee. The majority of individuals are indeed not concerned by the residents' committee's actions and prefer more personal forms of leisure. In these conditions, the committee must combine many tactics of “presentation of self”, personal sympathy and friendship in order to benefit from the residents' help.

The presence of people officially defined by the residents' committee as “neighbourhood community volunteers” (shequ zhiyuanzhe) illustrate the importance of building strong social networks in the neighbourhood. Residents' committee employees rely on neighbours who are willing to help them achieve their daily work. The help can be punctual, but the committee also builds long-term relationships in order to guarantee more stable and more efficient management. Being at the same time loyal supporters and critical advisers, these “small group leaders” (zuzhang) are involved in the neighbourhood life. Among them are the people responsible for watching housing units and reporting local security issues. Each housing unit (courtyard, building, storey) is associated with one or two residents chosen by their committee to serve as local informers. The members of local security patrols in charge of watching the neighbourhood during daytime still carry their famous red band around the arm. Do they embody the “eyes on the street” of social control? Most of them are retired and not particularly efficient in the prevention of crime. Their tasks mainly consist in indicating the right way to lost pedestrians, or in having small talks with the

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34 This concept characterizes individuals in situations of social vulnerability and isolation. It is introduced by Robert Castel in *Les métamorphoses de la question sociale : une chronique du salariat*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999 (2nd ed.).
35 Michel Foucault, ed. by James D. Faubion, *Essential works..., op. cit.*, p. 345.
36 For instance, many teenagers became “volunteers” during the year welcoming the Olympic Games in Beijing.
38 It should be noted that the Chinese society seems to have a very low rate of crime activity, although I did not have access to official statistics in this field.
neighbours. Their daily presence contributes to maintaining sociability and avoid loneliness: these older people like sitting outside or walking, especially in the city center, where inhabitants are much attached to their urban environment.

Today’s “volunteers” redefine the meaning of “activism” (jiji fenzi), which characterized political “citizenship” in Maoist China. Nowadays, committing in neighbourhood watch groups is no longer motivated by political dogma. Volunteers are rather led by socio-psychological considerations, such as their attachment to the neighbourhood, the opportunity to enjoy daily forms of sociability or the feeling to be contributing to the symbolic moral task of preserving the local public order.

V. What can we learn from the contradictions between discourse and practical experience?

According to in-depth interviews and direct observation in several neighbourhoods in Beijing, one can doubt the ability of the residents' committees in playing a very efficient part, mostly because of their limited autonomy of action. In theory, the “neighbourhood community” is supposed to become an autonomous space of collective organisation. But in practice, the local authorities still supervise the overall work and pressurise the employees with imperative goals to reach, while giving them limited resources. In spite of the political discourse about building a “harmonious community” (hexie shequ), the configurations of power relations in the neighbourhoods reveal important differences between official speech and everyday practices.

1. Ambiguous perceptions of the residents' committees by the residents: tactics of resistance associated to a form of hidden attachment

My ethnographic fieldwork in several neighbourhoods in Beijing revealed that the majority of residents are not even aware of the residents' committee's existence. Beijingers who have a “normal” job are rarely present in their residential neighbourhood during daytime. Thus they do not often interact with the residents’ committee. Many people interviewed were not sure what functions this entity carried, randomly quoting “political propaganda”, “helping the poor” or “taking care of the old”.

Fieldwork interviews also showed that the residents are rarely naïve towards the residents' committee. Most of them are aware that this organization is “autonomous” only in theory. Many believe indeed that their committee “don't represent” (bu daibiao) them. Because of the hierarchical position toward the street office, the residents' committees are hardly trustworthy to the residents.
But the members' commitment and hard work also favours sympathy and encouragement.

Moreover, the residents often complain about their committee's not knowing (bu liaojie) the neighbourhood as deeply as they should, especially in newly developed urban areas.

[Interview with a resident in a recent residential compound, December 28th 2007] “Can you believe that? Our residents' committee staff are all sent from outside the neighbourhood! This organisation was supposed to represent us... This is not possible, they don't live here, they don't know this place. In these conditions, how can they pretend to protect my interests?”

This problem is linked to the process of professionalization that the residents' committee are undergoing. This results in the fact that residents' committees' members do not necessarily live in the neighbourhoods where they work. In addition, due to their low salary, very few of them can afford to live in high-class neighbourhoods, which drives them away from the local inhabitants.

In most cases, the residents' committee is considered as a quite “inefficient” structure by the residents. Many of them point out the residents' committee's limited capacity of action: “they have no power” (mei you quanli). About the residents' committee's ability in dealing with neighbourhood-based conflicts, most people believe that “they cannot solve the problem” (jie jue bu liao). Moreover, in high-quality housing, an important proportion of home-owners develops strong social prejudice against the local employees, among which the residents' committees' members, whom they consider as not educated enough to help them: “their human quality is too low” (suzhi tai di). The Chinese notion of “suzhi” expresses a form of social judgement as well as a distinctive attitude against “outsiders”. According to Norbert Elias, “the collective disgrace attached to such groups by other more powerful groups and embodied in social incentives and stereotyped blame-gossip usually has a deep anchorage in the personality structure of their members as part of their individual identity and as such cannot be easily shaken off”.

Finally, the individualized relationship between the residents' committee and the residents should be taken into account in the analysis of political life: the ethnographic investigation in Beijing allows to grasp the nature of their interactions. The residents' committee is indeed often the object of personal criticism, because they are the closest administrative figure city people can relate to. In these conditions, the residents often express their frustration, dissatisfaction or anger against the staff members. However, in spite of such strong criticism, the general existence of this grassroots organisation is rarely put to question. Although they complain about its uselessness, a

majority of people do not think the residents' committee should disappear. Long-time Beijing dwellers, especially if they lived in the *hutong* or if they come from other major cities are quite attached to the residents' committee as they have always known this organisation, which is present in their memory of socialist times. More generally, people usually think of the residents' committee as a potential source of help. They regard it as “useful, in case we get into some trouble”. But because of their limited autonomy of action, the residents' committee can only help for small problems and report more serious issues to the upper levels of the Chinese city administration. The paradox is that the residents often complain a lot against their living conditions on a daily basis, including against the residents' committee. But at the same time, they feel attached to this organisation, as if paradoxically the very feeling of attachment gave them the right to criticize. The politics of neoliberalism introduced new forms of social conflict and conflict management: social tensions in the Chinese society are easily noticeable at the local level of the neighbourbood. The residents' problems and dissatisfaction come from material issues, which drive their vision of life and orientate their judgment of what is “unfair”. The housing situation illustrates well the unbalanced power relationships rooted in the Chinese society: interest coalitions between developers and city official emerge with land market activities, leading for instance to forced housing evictions.

2. Perceptions by the residents' committee members: between pride, exhaustion and uncertainty towards the future

The residents' committee is perceived in an ambivalent way by the staff members, who express both a feeling of pride for having gained a recognized status, and of frustration because of the growing pressure in the field of neighbourhood management. Far from the idea of a monolithic bureaucracy, fieldwork reveals that working in a residents' committee office conveys in fact contradictory, changing subjectivities, between genuine enthusiasm and relative disenchantment.

Many employees are perplexed vis-a-vis this profession, especially for those working in newly developed neighbourhoods. Without long-term residence, which can help them build strong social networks and know the local situation better, their daily schedule is even more difficult to organise efficiently.

In general, the staff members are submitted to high levels of expectation but are still equipped with few means of action and get modest wages. The lack of professional management techniques constitutes a handicap for everyone, especially for the oldest members. The few means of action and the important amount of problems to deal with contribute to judging the job “difficult”, “hard”
and “tiring”. Elements such as overtime work, low wages, daily mediation of conflicts and litigations, criticism and claims from everywhere increase their feeling of being poorly considered. Let us notice that if being employed in a residents' committee may mean being part of the city administration at the lowest level, it does not at all constitute a means of getting promoted and reach higher levels in the administrative hierarchy.

The employees come from very different social backgrounds, but most of them have experienced previous professional difficulties, especially unemployment. This explains why being part of the residents' committee guarantees a three-year professional stability as member of the city administration, and offers minimum social protection: it is “better than nothing”, for everyone of them. A growing number of university graduate students recently integrates this sector due to a difficult context on the labour market.

The development of social work as a high-priority of the residents' committees also offers the employees new opportunities to commit themselves into their work. Some of them “like helping others”. A few symbolic objects such as the official stamp or the official sign at the entrance of the office can convey feelings of recognition. The months spent observing their daily activities showed that these employees strive at being recognized, legitimized and accepted by the residents in the neighbourhood. Many statements, such as “this job is all about trust”, illustrate this attitude. Although they are often considered as extensions of the administration, they spend much time cultivating personal interactions with their residents.

Finally, the real mission of the residents' committee consists in a difficult task: executing official decisions from above, even if these are unrealistic, unfair or not welcome by the residents. It is a way for the political elite to avoid direct contact with the population: the residents must first report to their residents' committee before getting appointments with upper levels of the administration. Equipped with few means of action, this organisation is submitted to great pressure because of their direct contact with the residents and, at the same time, their hierarchical dependency to the orders and decisions from the upper levels of the administration.

3. The limits of control: the loose dimension of the surveillance net and the impossibility of a total subjection of the individuals

Chinese neighbourhoods are not easily supervised, as proved by the difficulty experienced by the residents' committees. In spite of a discourse about “modernising” the city, the employees are still under-equipped in order to carry out their missions. The perceptions expressed both by the
residents and the residents' committee members bring to light the differences between the political objectives and directives, and what is really happening. In theory, the residents' committee keep a close eye on the local population, but in practice, the neighbourhood space is difficult to manage on a daily basis. The inhabitants are much more interested in personal forms of leisure and family-based social relationships. They spend much time beyond the geographical limits of the shequ. The growing mobility of the population contrasts with the fixed position of the residents' committees. The loose dimension of this surveillance device illustrates the fragility of control. The city of Beijing is still a place where people shape their own existence and where social practices develop far from the state monitoring agencies.

Other forms of control, mainly self-control and societal control, happen to be more important than that of official government organs. City dwellers are very concerned with public security, health prevention, living a “normal life”, staying “out of trouble” etc. Social norms are thus very deeply incorporated in people's lifestyles. Going with a dynamic economic growth, the majority of people have had access to the “small prosperity” (xiaokang shehui), which was one of the state's objectives. Moreover, the political slogan of the “harmonious society” (hexie shehui) introduced by the central authorities (Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao) is very popular among the population. Following periods of political instability, most inhabitants now aspire to material well being and enjoy domestic comfort after the previous. The events of Tiananmen in 1989 may have brought disillusionments about political reform. In that sense, they focus more on the recognition of the individuals' legal rights and the development of the Rule of law in China. Finally the domestic sphere becomes a battlefield where the state must meet a new challenge: harmonising the different interests at stake.

Conclusion

In urban China, the general pattern of everyday life is still framed by grassroots ambiguous organisations like the residents' committees, officially in charge of “representing” the residents. An ethnographic investigation of Beijing's urban neighbourhoods reveals the specific meaning given to “society” in China. According to Jean-Louis Rocca, “in the minds of the state authorities, society is the aggregate of organisations that form the framework of society (…). So it is not society that is in charge of social work so much as its traditional representatives”. As a footbridge between the complex social and political configurations of the neighbourhoods in Beijing, this multi-faced organisation hesitates between its availability for the residents and its limited autonomy. Therefore,

The development of this institution illustrates the process of “bureaucratic socialization” and neoliberal orientation of public action in China.

The importance of this institution in the Chinese cities lies in the social work and the progressive acknowledgement of the inhabitants' social needs. The new regimes of governmentality lead to the territorializing of public action. In Beijing, each neighbourhood is now managed by a residents' committee. The residential neighbourhood thus becomes a norm of public policy implementing. The strategies of the urban administration at the lowest level lead to the territorializing of public action, embodied by the “neighbourhood community” (shequ) policy. This style of urban management appears in a context of recognition of potential breaks, social difficulties and eventual ruptures. However, the growing mobility of the urban population marks a strong limitation to their efficiency.

Nevertheless, this channel of expression constitutes an attempt to avoid the emergence of “social issues”, following the political slogan of the “harmonious society” (hexie shehui) promoted by the actual leaders. The desire for social stability spreads partly through the action of the residents' committees, which are now in charge of many aspects of the residents' everyday life. This process is an attempt to fit better with the population needs in each neighbourhood, in order to preserve social stability. Between surveillance and protection, trust and distrust, the residents' committee is still a structural element of neighbourhood life, but not the only one. The residents themselves are constantly reassessing the limits between intimacy and sociality and the whole network of power relations.

41 Ibid.