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Muh Bi Lin
George Fox University, mbilin@georgefox.edu

W Jay Gabbard

Yuan-Shie Hwang

Jeremiah Jaggers

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Abstract   Instead of claiming responsibility in caring for its citizens from cradle to grave, China now emphasizes 'small government and big society' in its allocation of social services. In one southwest province of China, as a result of the urban Community Residents Committee (CRC) Organization Acts of 1989, the CRC has become the core of social services in this region and is on the front line of social service delivery. This paper reports the results of a field study on the CRC at a number of pilot demonstration sites in this province. Focus group discussions were conducted in order to identify characteristics and patterns of committee members' experiences. Thematic patterns undergirding the future development of urban community-based social services in China are identified and discussed.

Before the 1978 economic reform, urban neighborhood organizations were integral parts of the service delivery under the Communist planned economy and socialist welfare systems in China. The centralized social service provisions trickled down from the administrative hierarchy in the central government to the local communities, in that neighborhood organizations were the primary front line service providers (Xu and Jones, 2004). The economic reform since 1978 does not only lead to a fundamental transformation of the centralized planned economy, it is also bringing about inevitable changes in social welfare delivery. With the diminishing of job security resulted from the drastic changes in the state owned enterprises, such as privatization, reorganization, and downsizing, there was a collapse of the safety net that was traditionally built into the employment unit.

Instead of claiming responsibility in caring for its citizens from cradle to grave, the Chinese government now embraces the concept of 'small government and big society' (Ministry of Civil Affairs, P. R. o. C, 2000). New forms of community-based social services have been tested, with the hope that effective models can be identified for bridging the widening gap between increasing demand of services and the decreasing provisions from the state. Instituted through the Urban Community Residents Committee Organization Acts in 1989, the Community Residents Committee (CRC) has become the core of this social experiment and is designated as the front line entity for carrying out such an experiment (Zhang, 2001). As well, high expectations for this movement from the government prompted the former Prime Minister Zhu Rongji to say that local communities will be the foundation of a new social welfare system (Zhang, 2001). The experiments on testing the efficacy of community-based services were intensified by the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is the desire of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the entity charged with the responsibility of social welfare, to evaluate the experiments and to identify effective models for implementation at the national level (Ministry of Civil Affairs, P. R. o. C, 2001).

Even though the concept of community-based services is not new to China, how it is going to evolve and shape the future of social service delivery in this transition economy and rapidly changing society is still yet to be seen. To carry out the mandate from the Central government, each province is expected to systematically implement pilot models in selected demonstration sites before considering a large scale implementation. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research, especially empirical field based studies for guiding the design and implementation. In response to the invitation of the Provincial Civil Affairs Department from one southwest province in China, the authors conducted a limited scale and informal evaluation by investigating the experiences and interpretations of CRC members in relation to their participation in the pilot project implementation. Since the CRC is the primary organization for implementing such an experiment, committee members' interpretations of their experiences would arguably be one of the most important sources for shedding light on the efficacy of the model.

This article reports the results of such a field study at a number of pilot demonstration sites in one southwest province. Focus group discussions were conducted for identifying characteristics and patterns of committee members' experiences. The thematic patterns undergirding the future development of urban community-based social services in China are addressed. It is important to note that the 'end-users' of these community-based services, the ordinary community residents, were not the main target of the investigation and only a few of them were briefly contacted during

the community field visits after the focus group discussion. Interpretations of study results should be cognizant of this limitation.

About the CRC
According to its pilot implementation plans (Department of Civil Affairs, 2002), the city is divided into a number of neighborhood communities based on their education, culture, health, commerce, history and other factors. A CRC composed of five to nine members is established as the official body in charge of the public affairs in the community. The members are elected through a democratic process for a 3-year and repeatable term. Candidates usually are nominated by neighborhood resident groups, community social organizations and different local Communist Party and governmental units.

The CRCs, in most cases, rely on government funding for operations and for paying subsides to their members. Most of their works are direct assignments from the *jie dao ban*, meaning street (or district) administrative office. While it is supposed to be an autonomous community organization as stated by laws, the design and implementation of CRC are anchored in the paradoxical political context of modern China. Economic and social reforms are cautiously and sometime reluctantly relished when the risk to political status quo is calculated and managed. To what degree the CRC is able to function according to what is called for is thus worthwhile to examine.

Methods

Sampling
In order to gain diverse perspectives, four different neighborhood communities in the capital of the province were selected for this study. Administrative jurisdiction, population characteristics and size, and economic conditions are important criteria during the purposive sampling process. Each of these four communities is under a different administrative jurisdiction called *jie dao ban*. In terms of population characteristics, one of the communities is chosen for its uniqueness in having about one-fourth of the population as migrant workers. The size of the population ranges from 1,289 to 3,501 families. These four communities also reflect differences in their economic conditions. One community is relatively rich; another is relatively poor while the other two are in between.

Data collection
For each community selected, a focus group discussion was conducted with participating members from the CRC. Also present during the focus group discussion were officials from the Provincial Civil Affairs Department, city government and related district offices. From the local academic side, one

social work educator from the department of social work at a prominent Chinese university was invited to serve as an observer to provide feedback, based on his contextualized expertise and local knowledge for enhancing the validity of the data collection process. All focus group discussions were co-facilitated by two social work educators from Taiwan and from the Western Kentucky University in the United States, respectively. As a means of triangulation and to give depth to the data from focus group discussion, field trips into all the communities under study were conducted following the focus group discussion. During the field visits, community residents, volunteer groups and government officials were interviewed. The visits were proven to be beneficial as they generated additional data for further verifying or clarifying data collected through the focus group discussion.

Each focus group meeting lasted for about two hours. Together with field visits, the time for data collection in each community was approximately four to five hours. The format of the focus group discussion was semi-structured. The following questions were posted to initiate the discussion and to help the group to refocus when needed:

(1) What have been the main tasks/activities carried out by the CRC? Members are asked to itemize the tasks/activities until the group exhausted the list.
(2) Is the CRC achieving what it is called for? Why or why not?
(3) What is it like to be a member of the CRC? What have been the greatest satisfaction and challenges?
(4) What has been the biggest challenge and what kinds of supports are needed in order for the CRC to do an effective job?

The attendance rate was very high. In three out of the four communities, all members of the CRCs participated in the discussion and only one member from the other community did not attend. Not only was the attendance rate high, the discussion was very enthusiastic as well. The two-hour discussion generated a great volume of data that reflect the direct experiences and honest opinions of the committee members. According to our observer, regardless of the presence of several government officials in the discussion, the members were not deterred from expressing themselves straightforwardly.

Data analysis
During the process of data collection, notes where taken by the facilitators and by two social work students from a Chinese university. The process generated significant amounts of qualitative data. After the initial coding and analysis, the preliminary findings were presented to and reviewed by a panel that consisted of the co-facilitators, the observer and three government officials

whom have participated in the entire data collection process and who were representing different levels of governmental hierarchy. The panel discussion served the function of triangulation; it also helped further enrich the concepts and themes initially identified. Because of their expertise in community-based services and their knowledge of the specific communities under study, the panelists provided invaluable information to the data analysis process. With input provided by the panelists, the authors went back to the field notes again for further verification and consolidation of concepts, and for identifying thematic patterns. Relevant literature was consulted throughout the process to shed light on the phenomenon under study.

Findings and discussion

Several thematic patterns characterizing CRCs' experiences in relation to their participation in community-based services were identified. The patterns are presented here as tensions indicating dichotomized forces that are shaping their experiences. The existence of such tensions, however, does not imply a negative verdict toward the condition of the community-based services. Nevertheless, how these tensions evolve in the years to come would certainly have significant impact on the efficacy of community-based services in China. In other words, the prospect of the community-based services experiment in filling the void of services resulting from the shrinkage of governmental function hinges on the reconciliation of these tensions. These tensions include: demands versus resources, social service versus political control, horizontal alignment versus vertical jurisdiction and professionalism versus volunteerism.

Demands versus resources
The CRCs consistently commented that they were expected to do a lot while they did not have the resources needed for doing the job right. The number of specific tasks performed or expected to be performed by the CRC ranged from 72 to more than 100 among different communities. The nature of tasks spreads across the areas of residents' lives, such as medical and health services, marital and family counseling, retirement pension, crime prevention, education, just to name a few. The target populations include the elderly, adult, youth, children, infants, the poor, the disabled and unemployed. In essence, it covers almost all spheres of human life for everyone in the community.

One probably would not be surprised to see such a high expectation for the CRCs from a historical perspective. While 'small government and big society' is in fact the espoused principle, its realization is not a straightforward process. In the process of transitioning from a government unit to a social organization, the CRC has inherited from the old structure the

responsibility as the front line unit in providing social services, but without the provision of resources from the government as the old form did. The anticipation of an exploding social vigor to catch up what is left behind by the government seems to be unrealistic giving the fact that the majority of Chinese citizens are just crossing the threshold of 'winbao', a Chinese term meaning having enough to eat and being able to keep warm. The size of the middle class is still a scanty 15 percent when compared with the 60 percent in the United States (Economist, 2002). Without a reasonable size of middle class to support charity and philanthropy, the expansion of social services from the private sector is a big challenge.

Social services versus political control
Transitioning from previously the lowest level of governmental unit, the CRC has inevitably inherited the political control function under the traditional Communist governing ideology. It is only reasonable to anticipate that the residual effect of political control is part of the composition for the functions expected and performed by the CRC. The expectation of dual functions of service and political control was not a concern in the previously tightly controlled political system, but as the concepts of human rights and political freedom are beginning to gain their legitimacy in China, the two are on a collision course. The point of collision can be traced back to the Urban Community Residents Committee Organization Acts established in 1989 and further ratified in 1998. The Acts serves as the legal base for community-based service experiments. In it, the responsibilities of the Committee include not only social services but also maintaining social order. Manifested in the day-to-day operations are activities such as reinforcing family planning policy (one child policy), distributing propaganda from the government and the Communist Party organizations, detecting signs of social unrest, monitoring parolees and mediating residents' conflicts. In some committee members' own words, the CRC is expected to do 'government work'—political policing and 'social work'—helping the residents. Some committee members expressed the concern of difficulty in gaining trust from the residents because of the 'government' work that they are expected to perform. The incompatibility of services and political control was felt. As one of the participants commented, 'When I visited the family, I could sense their suspicion about the intention of my services, because they see the other hats that I am wearing in 'jisheng' (family planning) and 'weian' (maintaining peace and order) as well'.

Some hoped that a part of their work could be reassigned to other units such as the police departments or the District Administrative Offices (jie dao ban), so that they may do only 'social work'. Nevertheless, there were also participants embracing the two roles without seeing contradictions or difficulties.

It is unrealistic to expect the CRC to completely relinquish their political control obligations in such a short period of time. Of course, the inability of some committee members in discerning the paradox of social service and political control is of concern, and yet the issue is more of a structural one. Even in the economic sector, the transition to a market economy in China is a gradual and still evolving process. Given the fact that social revolutions have led to the establishment of Communist China, the power of social forces is not only recognized but also feared by the Communist regime in China. A carefully orchestrated political process in directing and controlling social reforms is expected. The Chinese government seems to want the liberation of social forces to fill in the gaps of services while keeping the risks to social and political instability manageable. Unless the risk management is satisfied, structural and legal restructuring allowing the CRC to be 'social' will not take place. The efficacy of the CRC in carrying out social services is thus largely determined at the pragmatic level in how they balance the tension between service and control.

Horizontal alignment versus vertical jurisdiction
Similar to the issue of political control, the transition to community-based services marks the relinquishing of resources provisions from the top but not of the jurisdiction control. As a few members lamented, 'the Residents Committee is still one leg of the District Administration Office (jiedaoban)'. Almost all government and Party organizations retain their setup and presence at the community level, such as family planning, public welfare and relief, pension administration, Party Youth Corps, Woman's Federation, and so on. While the CRC has been given the responsibility to almost everything in the community, difficulties arise when each of these community-based organizations does not have the autonomy to coordinate with the CRC because the strict jurisdiction control within its own hierarchical structure. What have been reported by the committee members are 'lack of coordination', 'duplicated investment', 'waste of resources', 'lack sense of direction', 'services did not meet the needs', and so on. To what degree the CRC would be able to become a community agency focusing on meeting needs would depend on how different organizations loosen their vertical jurisdiction control to allow for a smooth horizontal alignment.

Professionalism versus volunteerism
Tension between professionalism and volunteerism in the development of social work in China is well noted (Yuen-Tsang and Wang, 2002; Yan and Tsang, 2005), and it starts right at the community grassroots level as this study found out. When asked what has been the biggest challenge for doing the work, the lack of know-how was revealed second frequently,

only next to the lack of resources. By looking at the training of CRC members, there was not a single person with a degree or extensive training in social work, community development, counseling, psychology or other human service-related areas. The reemergence of social work education is still very recent after the disciples of sociology and social work were banned completed by the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1960s (Xia and Guo, 2002; Chi, 2005). Higher education institutes in China have just started sending out their social work-related graduates in the last few years. There is a severe lack of professionally trained workers even at the higher education institutes not to mention at the grassroots community level.

The almost complete reliance on volunteers with little training has led to concerns regarding not only the quality of services, but also the violation of fundamental values and ethics such as confidentiality and human dignity. For example, the names of the low income assistance recipients were publicized in the community bulletin, and compliance with other policies could be used as conditions for receiving low income assistance. The efficacy of the community-based services would depend greatly on how the pools of volunteer resources are equipped with professional knowledge and skills for doing the services. Hiring social workers, counselors and other human services professionals into the office instead of totally relying on volunteers could mark an important step toward tilting the imbalance. With the rapidly developing social work and other human services-related education in the past decade, qualified human service professionals would not be difficult to find. To overcome the challenge of fund shortage at the community level, it is suggested that the District Administration Office (jiedaoban) hires such professional workers to provide technical assistance to the community levels.

Conclusion

Re-engineering the service delivery system is of critical importance to China in wake of the rapidly changing social and economic conditions. While the market sector has reemerged from the previously Communist system as an important factor in meeting human needs, how would the rest of the unmet needs resulting from the change of government functions be handled is not an easy question. The experiment in the CRC led community-based services is an important attempt in dealing with the issue. The efficacy of this approach relies on how these tensions are reconciled: between demands versus resources, the social service versus political control, the horizontal alignment versus vertical jurisdiction control and professionalism versus volunteerism.

It is important to note, however, these tensions are anchored at the paradox at the larger societal level in China, which is the expectation of a potent social force capable of solving problems and meeting human

needs but not demanding further human rights and democracy. The findings of this study do not indicate that the push for community-based solution to social problems comes with an intention for community empowerment. Neither is it the planned process in decentralizing political power. This is consistent with observations elsewhere that the purpose of the community building in China is not to recreate a Western style civil society. Rather, it is expected to restructure the existing CRCs into functional welfare providers without compromising political control (Yan, 2007). Nevertheless, research on post-Soviet states' community development, such as Armenia (Babajanian, 2005) suggests that even the community-based, bottom up, capacity-building interventions may not be effective in facilitating sustainable civic engagements if the country's governance is not changed. Despite of the enthusiastic involvement of CRC members, without wider citizen engagement, the CRC-led community building could merely become mimicking of the centralized state at the community level controlled by a few elites. As China continues to gain its confidence through economic development, hopefully the paradox at the national level and thus the tensions at the grassroots level would be reconciled at a greater speed. At the same time, let us advocate that CRCs be transformed through the change of laws into a community council type of organization capable of engaging citizens for overseeing government's work at the community level, instead of continuing to be the extension of the government units.

Muh Bi Lin and Yuan-Shie Hwang are at the National Chi-Nan University, Taiwan, Republic of China.

W. Jay Gabbard and Jeremiah Jaggers are at the Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA.

Address for Correspondence: Muh Bi Lin, National Chi-Nan University, Taiwan, Republic of China; email: mblin@ncnu.edu.tw

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