

Deliberating Urban Activism in Chinese Middle-Class Neighborhoods

Abstract

Social unrests have become one major challenge to the rule of China's party-state. To effectively resolve disputes and conflicts at local level before they escalate to larger scale social unrests, is a key criterion for local government performance evaluation in China today. With a particular focus on neighborhood governance, this paper examines the mechanisms of deliberation and conflict resolution in Chinese urban middle-class residential communities. Along with the rise of private home ownership and urban middle-class residential estates, disputes and conflicts have risen between the residents, resident self-elected organization (homeowner associations), real estate developer and property management companies, and the local government. The local state, through their agent Residents' Committees, actively intervenes and mediates the conflicts in those neighborhoods. Through the lens of deliberation in middle-class neighborhoods, this paper analyzes 1) how and to what extent deliberation is introduced to and employed as an instrumental tool by local government to achieve their goal of maintaining social stability. 2) in what ways and to what extent deliberation has served as part of governance strategies. and 3) whether and how the state and non-state actors interact with each other during this process to produce more democratic governance under the party-state's authoritarian rule. The findings suggest that 1) deliberation has become an instrumental tool for conflict resolution introduced by local government to middle-class neighborhoods. Residents' Committees, on behalf of the state, become key coordinator and mediator during the deliberation process. 2) Recruitment of resident volunteers has become a crucial strategy through whom Residents' Committees mobilize resident participation, to facilitate not only deliberation meetings, but more importantly, the pre- and after-meeting informal talks which contribute significantly to the deliberative outcomes. 3) Those deliberative practices on the one hand improve deliberative capacity of neighborhood governance by showing more tolerance of different opinions, more inclusiveness of participant groups, and more effectiveness of achieving agreements. On the other hand, those practices to a certain extent reinforce the party-state's leadership through mass mobilization led by the local state.

Introduction

The concepts of deliberative democracy and practices of consultative politics have played distinctive roles in Chinese politics. Deliberation and consultative practices have reflected the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) "Mass Line" tradition which emphasizes the function of gathering ideas and concerns from the people and making decisions based on these. With the shift of governance focus from class struggle to the development of the market economy in China, consultative politics and the Mass Line have remained as special components of Chinese politics. In recent years, in addition to the growing influence of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) on policy making,¹ the Party-state has endorsed deliberative democracy as a distinct form of democracy that is relevant to the country's experience,² and to "strengthen socialist consultative democracy" under Xi's administration.³ At local level, especially since the market reforms in the early 1990s, local initiatives and flexibilities have been encouraged to facilitate local GDP growth and ensure social stability. During this period, deliberative democracy, as a continuation of CCP's mass line tradition, has taken places at different level of government, even though it seems like "an unlikely place,"⁴ given Chinese Party-state's authoritarian rule.

In 2011 Baogang He and Mark Warren introduced the concept of 'authoritarian deliberation'⁵ which argues democratic deliberation can take place and even be promoted in an authoritarian state as an effective local governance strategy, despite its one-party rule and resistance to regime-level democratization. In "deliberative authoritarianism", they argue, political elites "respond to persuasive influences, generated either among participants, or in the form of arguments made by

¹ Yan, X. 2011. Regime inclusion and the resilience of authoritarianism: The local people's political consultative conference in Post-Mao Chinese politics. *The China Journal*, 66: 53–77.

² Xinhua News Agency. 2008. Commentary: Maturing mode of 'deliberative democracy'—Chinese way to achieve harmonious politics. (14 March), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/452158516>.

³ Documents from the CCP Central Committee on February 9, 2015.

⁴ Fishkin, J. S., He, B., Luskin, R. C., and Siu, A. 2010. Deliberative democracy in an unlikely place: Deliberative Polling in China. *British Journal of Political Science*, 40: 435–44.

⁵ He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 269–89.

participants to decision-makers”.⁶ The authoritarian deliberation, especially in the context of contemporary China, has been contested and supported by the Party-state’s incentive to secure political legitimacy, the local government’s practical needs to maintain social stability for economic development, and the growing autonomy and flexibility at the local level to experiment innovations of the so-called “social management (*shehui guanli*)” and “autonomous governance (*zizhi*)”. In particular, deliberative practices in the past two decades reveals a more practical instrumental role of effective conflict resolution and management of social unrest. So far, the deliberative approach has been adopted by a number of local governments to resolve local labour disputes⁷ and citizen disputes.⁸ In those cases the deliberative approach not only helped to resolve problems efficiently, but also promoted an image of a more responsive and responsible local government.

This study contributes to the authoritarian deliberation thesis in twofold. On the one hand, this research illustrates the key mechanisms of how authoritarian deliberation can be applied to political development in China today. To date, studies are “limited in scope and focused on particular problems of governance”,⁹ and there is inadequate research on general mechanisms that “producing a systemic relationship between authoritarianism and deliberation.”¹⁰ This research, then examines in what ways and to what extent deliberation is employed to deal with practical governance matters and further shapes grassroots level governance mechanisms in general. This study examines authoritarian deliberation as a neighbourhood governance strategy with a “systemic approach to deliberative democracy”.¹¹ This prominent approach looks beyond isolated deliberative practices and institutions

⁶ He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: p.274.

⁷ Hess, S. 2009. Deliberative institutions as mechanisms for managing social unrest: The case of the 2008 Chongqing taxi strike. *China: An International Journal* 7(2): 336–352.

⁸ He, B. 2014. From village election to village deliberation in rural China: A case study of a deliberative democracy experiment. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(2).

⁹ He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: p.269.

¹⁰ He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: p.271.

¹¹ Mansbridge, J., J. Bohman, S. Chambers, T. Christiano, A. Fung, J. Parkinson, and D.F. Thompson. 2012. A

to examine their interdependence and interaction within a larger-scale deliberative system. The essence of the systemic approach of deliberative democracy is that it allows assessment of the completeness and effectiveness of deliberative systems albeit the society's political system. During this process, deliberative capacity building¹² proposed by John Dryzek can produce authentic, inclusive and consequential deliberations that integrate micro-level deliberative forums and macro-level communication in the public sphere into one dynamic system, which does not have to be limited to any particular kind of political institution.

On the other hand, this study offers empirical evidence to show how and to what extent deliberation is introduced to and employed as an instrumental tool by local governments to resolve neighborhood conflicts. To date, there have been inadequate in-depth empirical studies illustrating the complexities of how authoritarian deliberation shapes the local governance mechanisms, through its interactions with other governance strategies. The development of authoritarian deliberation in China in recent years are closely associated with the political scenario which tolerates, relatively speaking, more space for grassroots level governance, with endorsing the participation of social organizations (*shehui tuanti*) in local governance and encouraging “autonomous governance (*zizhi*)” of the residents in urban neighborhoods. In this context, Chinese urban neighborhoods have become critical contested ground for authoritarian deliberation with two distinct features. One is that despite the rigid political control of CCP, neighbourhood deliberation is associated with a certain level of flexibility and autotomy which accommodate multiple (especially non-state) actors, and various forms of participation in searching for practical resolutions for neighbourhood conflicts. The other feature is that neighbourhood deliberation is one component of the overall local governance strategies which include a mix of deliberative features and non-deliberative activities, deliberative institutions and

systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In *Deliberative systems—Deliberative democracy at the large scale*, ed. J. Parkinson and J. Mansbridge, 1–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹² Dryzek, J.S. 2009. Democratization as deliberative capacity building. *Comparative Political Studies* 42: 1379–1402.

other kinds of political institutions, and strategies for deliberation and other tactics for neighbourhood governance.

More specifically, the findings highlight the crucial role of Residents' Committees (*juweihui*) as the agent of the state in shaping deliberation mechanisms in middle-class neighborhoods. In particular, the recruitment of resident volunteers has become a crucial strategy through whom Residents' Committees mobilize resident participation, to facilitate not only deliberation meetings, but more importantly, the pre- and after-meeting informal talks which contribute significantly to the deliberative outcomes. Those deliberative practices on the one hand improve deliberative capacity of neighborhood governance by showing more tolerance of different opinions, more inclusiveness of participant groups, and more effectiveness of achieving agreements. On the other hand, those practices to a certain extent reinforce the party-state's leadership through mass mobilization led by the local state.

The Chinese Characteristics of Authoritarian Deliberation

Despite the authoritarian deliberation thesis has offered a useful framework for comparative politics, it is important to examine the development of deliberative institutions in China with characteristics that are specific to the Chinese political context. One major feature is that deliberative politics in contemporary China is rooted in political consultation in Chinese history and Confucian culture.¹³ More importantly, the cultural roots of political consultation were incorporated into the Maoist "Mass Line"— "from the people, to the people", which emphasized the gathering of ideas and concerns from the people, as well as decision-making that was responsive to the people's opinions.

¹³ Rosenberg, S. W. 2006. Human nature, communication, and culture: Rethinking democratic deliberation in China and the West. Pp. 77-112 in *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*, ed. by E. J. Leib and B. He. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

He, B. 2015. Deliberative culture and politics: The persistence of authoritarian deliberation in China. *Political Theory*, 42 (1): 58-81.

Deliberative democracy in reform-era China is consistent with these cultural and political traditions, insofar as it is considered to be a means of absorbing wisdom and strength from the Chinese people to improve governance and public policy. These continuities have certainly contributed to the now official view that deliberative democracy is that distinct form of democracy most relevant to the country's experience.¹⁴

In Chinese political culture, there has been a particular emphasis on consensus-based social stability in order to gain prosperity and reinforce regime legitimacy. In this respect, CCP faces similar functional needs and challenges as the Confucian dynasties. Since China's impressive economic rise in the 1980s, there have been increasing and intensified popular protests and collective resistance to challenge local-level governance legitimacy.¹⁵ Popular protests and collective resistance (i.e., protests, demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, group complaints, and so on) had risen from 8,700 in 1993 to 87,000 in 2005. For local governments, it is the "good performance" in achieving economic growth while maintaining local social stability that secures the career advancement for government officials. This "performance legitimacy" has resulted in local officials being less interested than the central government in protecting the regime's legitimacy, and being more concerned with policy implementation and fulfilment of responsibility.¹⁶ This stability-oriented and consensus political culture, accompanied by practical GDP-oriented governance issues is the driving force for the authoritarian regime to adopt deliberative politics, particularly at the local level.¹⁷ Deliberative

¹⁴ Xinhua News Agency. 2008. Commentary: Maturing mode of 'deliberative democracy'—Chinese way to achieve harmonious politics. (14 March), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/452158516>.

¹⁵ O'Brien, K., and Li, L. 2006. *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, C. K. 2007. *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cai, Y. 2008. Social conflicts and modes of action in China. *The China Journal* 59: 89–109.

¹⁶ Tong, Y. 2011. Morality, benevolence, and responsibility: Regime legitimacy in China from past to the present. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 16: 141–159.

¹⁷ Dryzek, J. S. 2010. *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 269–89.

democracy then is viewed by the CCP as a way of ensuring social harmony by providing places for the people's problems and demands to be heard and channelled into the political system.¹⁸

That leads to another feature of authoritarian deliberation in the Chinese political context, which is intertwined with other political agendas of the authoritarian state, i.e., stability control and governance legitimacy. Popular protests and collective resistance are not so unique to China. But China's own political, social and economic conditions—especially in terms of central-local relations—do have resulted in the contentious politics with Chinese characteristics, especially when it comes to the resolution of the social conflicts. On the one side, the Party-state needs the popular support to secure its regime legitimacy. On the other side, local governments place their governance priority on social stability which is considered as an essential condition for local GDP growth. As a result, Chinese local governments have taken significant steps in developing formal deliberative institutions and employing informal deliberations to manage and reduce social conflicts in the last decade. A recent study has shown a strong relationship between the number of social conflicts and the number of the local official documents that aim to publicize, introduce, organize, regulate, and report a diversity of deliberative practices.¹⁹ In this context, deliberative politics in China, especially the establishment of consultative institutions, have been motivated by political needs to collect or incorporate public opinions into the political decision-making process without diminishing the CCP's monopoly on political power.

The third feature of authoritarian deliberation operated in the Chinese context is deliberative politics in China involve the strong leadership of the Party-state. In the existing deliberative practices, key figures of local officials normally play a decisive role in initiating and performing these practices, and local government offices almost always organize and facilitate the deliberative forums. A

¹⁸ Xinhua News Agency. 2008. Commentary: Maturing mode of 'deliberative democracy'—Chinese way to achieve harmonious politics. (14 March), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/452158516>.

¹⁹ He, B., and Wu, J. 2017. Social conflicts and the rise of the institutionalization of local deliberative democracy in urban China. *Open Times*, March issue.

notable example is the annual Zeguo deliberative poll in the city of Wenling, in which outcomes determine the local government's policy choices of funding allocation for infrastructure projects.²⁰ Other empirical evidence has suggested,²¹ the possession of comprehensive local information and rich administrative resources have helped local governments to set agendas. In addition, because Party-state officials tend to know what problems need to be discussed with whom, they can help to recruit participants from the relevant interest groups, which in turn helps to make the processes successful. They also underwrite deliberative events by providing information, facilities and preparation. The leading role of local government in the deliberative events helps to ensure that deliberative outcomes are followed by practical policies and actions on the part of decision-makers.

Last but not the least, the operation of authoritarian deliberation in China is associated with a certain degree of local autonomy and flexibility regarding practical governance issues. As existing studies have shown, most deliberations do not go beyond practical governance matters at local level. However, even with China's rigid political controls, there is a certain degree of autonomy and flexibility with respect to local governance matters, which has enabled a surprising amount of political innovations, particularly with respect to deliberative processes. And there has been tolerance, and even encouragement for local deliberations to address various kinds of issues, including participatory budgeting,²² village assemblies,²³ and public consultations for selecting local

²⁰ Fishkin, J. S., He, B., Luskin, R. C., and Siu, A. 2010. Deliberative democracy in an unlikely place: Deliberative Polling in China. *British Journal of Political Science*, 40: 435–44.

²¹ Tang, B. 2015a. Deliberating governance in Chinese urban communities. *The China Journal* 73: 84–107.

Tang, B. 2015b. The discursive turn: Deliberative governance in China's urbanized villages. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 24, no. 91: 137–57.

²² Wu, Y. and Wang, W. 2012. Does participatory budgeting improve the legitimacy of the local government?: A comparative case study of two cities in China. *The Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 71: 122–135.

²³ Tan, Q. 2006. Deliberative democracy and village self-government in China. Pp. 197–215 in *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*, eds. E.J. Leib and B. He., New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

leaders,²⁴ price adjustments at the local level²⁵ (Ergenc 2014) and local environment projects (Mertha 2009, Han 2014).²⁶

Although deliberative cultures and practices in China have their uniqueness, it is important to examine their characteristics within a framework which helps us to understand the general development of deliberative institutions and designs despite individual differences. The systemic approach of deliberative democracy²⁷ fits this need well. This approach seeks to understand diverse sites and kinds of deliberative practice and institutions within broader systems, such that even imperfectly deliberative moments can serve deliberative functions. Systems can thus include diverse (both formal and informal) deliberative gatherings, multiple kinds of actors, and a diversity of institutions. On the systems view, when one deliberative site is overshadowed by (say) purely strategic talk aimed to moving an issue onto the public agenda, another site could, in principle, provide the balance necessary for system-level deliberative outcomes. The analytical focus of systemic approach thus goes beyond a single practice such as protesting—which, in itself, may have little deliberative quality—to look at whether the interactions among the various parts make positive contributions to an overall deliberative system.

Chinese urban middle-class neighborhoods offer an ideal research site to explore the systematic approach of authoritarian deliberation. Along with the rise of private home ownership and urban middle-class residential estates, disputes and conflicts have risen between the residents, resident self-elected organization (homeowner associations), real estate developer and property management

²⁴ He, B. and Thøgersen, S. 2010. Giving the people a voice? Experiments with consultative authoritarian institutions in China. *Journal of Contemporary China* 19(66): 675–92.

²⁵ Ergenc, C. 2014. Political efficacy through deliberative participation in urban China: A case study on public hearings. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(2):191-213.

²⁶ Mertha, A. 2009. 'Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0': Political pluralization in the Chinese policy process. *The China Quarterly*, 200: 995–1012.

Han, H. 2014. Policy deliberation as a goal: The case of Chinese ENGO activism. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(2): 173–90.

²⁷ Mansbridge, J., J. Bohman, S. Chambers, T. Christiano, A. Fung, J. Parkinson, and D.F. Thompson. 2012. A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In *Deliberative systems—Deliberative democracy at the large scale*, ed. J. Parkinson and J. Mansbridge, 1–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

companies, and the local government. The local state, through their agent Residents' Committees, actively intervenes and mediates the conflicts in those neighborhoods. The Residents' Committees are situated in every residential community, with five to ten staff hired by the local government. As a mode of communication, deliberation seeks the legitimacy of outcomes, in terms of the mutual agreement of all those affected by a decision. This process is about opinion and consensus formation, which serves the practical needs for Residents' Committees to resolve the conflicts before they go beyond the neighbourhoods.

Governance, Mass Mobilization and Deliberation in Urban Neighborhoods

Neighborhood governance has been a key site for leader-mass relations in Chinese politics. As the foundation of Chinese theories of leadership, leader-mass relations and certain types of policy-making,²⁸ the Mass Line theory argues that the success or failure of “any kind of work that requires [the masses'] participation”²⁹ depends ultimately on the masses' enthusiasm, willingness and power. With the shift of governance focus from class struggle to the development of socialist market economy, the mass line and mass mobilization have experienced changes in terms of scale, formats and agents. But one feature has remained, that is mass mobilization has been the key political strategy to maintain the public support for the regime legitimacy and CCP's one-party rule. Under Mao, urban work units (*danwei*) extended their control to urban residents' residential realm, including managing community affairs, mobilizing residents and implementing political propaganda. However, in the reform era, the traditional Mass Line approach has encountered challenges in urban middle-class neighbourhoods due to the new living environment that presents a privileged lifestyle based on certain levels of affluence of the residents.

²⁸ Blecher, Marc. “Consensual Politics in Rural Chinese Communities: The Mass Line in Theory and Practice.” *Modern China* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1979): 105–26.

²⁹ Mao, Zedong. *Selected Works of Mao Zedong III*, p. 236. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965.

To promote an image of high-quality life, the entrance to middle-class residential communities are often signalled by magnificent gates, and those neighbourhoods have introduced professional services to manage community facilities provided by property management companies.³⁰ Chinese middle-class neighbourhoods usually accommodate a large number of residents, ranging from two or three thousand to over ten thousand residents in one residential compound. Across the country, the urban middle-class residents consist of public servants, professionals and private business owners. In addition to the symbol of status, Chinese middle-class neighbourhoods are also about the residents' pursuit of privacy and social exclusion.³¹ Those neighbourhoods not only separate groups of different socioeconomic background, but also the residents' work life and their residence. The rise of middle-class neighbourhoods has weakened ties between residents' workplace and residence, where the resident becomes a client rather than a favoured employee.³² In general, residents see their residency as a status symbol characterised by private space without any unwanted disturbance.³³

³⁰ Atkinson, Rowland, and Sarah Blandy. "Introduction: International Perspectives on The New Enclavism and the Rise of Gated Communities." *Housing Studies* 20, no. 2 (2005): 177–86.

³¹ Pow, Choon-Piew. *Gated Communities in China: Class, Privilege and the Moral Politics of the Good Life*. Routledge, 2009.

Zhang, Li. *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Cornell University Press, 2010.

³² Ma, Laurence. "Urban Transformation in China, 1949-2000: A Review and Research Agenda." *Environment and Planning A* 34 (2002): 1545–69.

Wu, Fulong. "Sociospatial Differentiation in Urban China: Evidence from Shanghai's Real Estate Markets." *Environment and Planning A* 34 (2002): 1591–1615.

Wu, Fulong, and Anthony Gar-On Yeh. "Urban Spatial Structure in a Transitional Economy: The Case of Guangzhou, China." *Journal of American Planning Association* 65 (1999): 377–94.

Gaubatz, Piper Rae. "Urban Transformation in Post-Mao China: Impacts of The Reform Era on China's Urban Form." In *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China. The Potential for Autonomy and Community in Post Mao China*, edited by Deborah Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton, and Elizabeth J. Perry. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Wang, Yaping, and Alan Murie. "Social and Spatial Implications of Housing Reform in China." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24 (2000): 397–417.

Wu, Fulong. "The New Structure of Building Provision and The Transformation of The Urban Landscape in Metropolitan Guangzhou, China." *Urban Studies* 35 (1998): 259–83.

Wu, Fulong. "Rediscovering the 'Gate' Under Market Transition: From Work-Unit Compounds to Commodity Housing Enclaves." *Housing Studies* 20 (2005): 235–54.

³³ Pow, Choon-Piew. *Gated Communities in China: Class, Privilege and the Moral Politics of the Good Life*. Routledge, 2009.

Zhang, Li. *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Cornell University Press, 2010.

The spatial and social exclusion of middle-class neighbourhoods has produced new challenges to neighbourhood governance in Chinese cities. Ethnographic research in multiple cities³⁴ suggests that for middle-class residents, the Residents' Committee's administrative duties and its functions as community service provider are very distant from their needs. Sometimes, middle-class residents see the Residents' Committee as an intruder into their privacy which arbitrarily carries out its administrative duties. The high security offered by management companies in the gated communities has also made it difficult for Residents' Committee staff members to approach residents. In addition to infrequent contacts with the residents, Residents' Committees also face plural requests and disagreements regarding community affairs from the middle-class residents. The better-off, well-educated residents are more likely to challenge the Residents' Committee's implementation of government policies, question why something is done one way but not the other, and criticize the staff for not complying with policies. As a result, the lack of frequent contact with residents and insufficient knowledge of the residents' situation has made it difficult for Residents' Committees in middle-class neighbourhoods to complete their duties.

On the other hand, it is common to observe that Chinese middle-class residents have shown collective resistance against inadequate maintenance of their housing-estate facilities, excessive management fees and the poor quality of management. As a nationwide phenomenon, the real estate developers usually take for granted their right to leave in place a property-management company that would operate indefinitely. In the absence of any competition, these firms are well positioned to reap handsome profits from management fees. Then the management companies have become the main target when residents are dissatisfied with problems such as poor maintenance of the housing-estate facilities, excessively high management fees, and poor quality of services. Nation-wide, middle-class neighbourhoods have become an important contesting ground where the Chinese middle classes

³⁴ The data used in this article is collected from over 45 middle-class residential communities in six cities located in north eastern, eastern, central south and southern China. Between 2011 and 2016 I had taken in total 12 fieldtrips to those cities and conducted over 100 in-depth interviewees.

interact with the state and each other, through their participation in community governance and homeowner activism.³⁵ As a result, local government required the Residents' Committees to adopt new strategies to cope with those new governance issues associated with characteristic features of middle-class neighbourhoods.

Deliberation then, has been introduced and adopted as a popular conflict resolution strategy in Chinese urban neighbourhoods. This governance strategy situates in the framework of neighbourhood "residents' autonomous governance (*jumin zizhi*)" which encourages the participation of residents in governance matters regarding community affairs. Under the guidance of the state, the "autonomous governance" has been promoted as a popular governance strategy in Chinese urban neighbourhoods. The local state safeguards social stability through keeping disputes and conflicts inside the residential communities. With the focus on conflict resolution, deliberation in middle-class neighbourhoods is a snapshot of practices of authoritarian deliberation which serve the special functional needs of the Chinese Party-state. In addition to resolve the neighbourhood conflicts at the most level of the urban society, neighbourhood deliberation is also expected to help maintain mass mobilization and participation among Chinese urban middle-class residents. To achieve those goals, Residents' Committees, on behalf of the state, play a significant role in neighbourhood deliberation. As the rest of this paper shows, Residents' Committees, on behalf of the local government, introduce deliberative practices to middle-class neighbourhoods, set up institutional arrangements for neighbourhood deliberation, and connect separate deliberations to more macro-level governance mechanisms.

³⁵ Read, Benjamin L. "Democratizing the Neighbourhood? New Private Housing and Home-Owner Self-Organization in Urban China." *The China Journal*, no. 49 (January 1, 2003): 31–59.

Pow, Choon-Piew. *Gated Communities in China: Class, Privilege and the Moral Politics of the Good Life*. Routledge, 2009.

Zhang, Li. *In Search of Paradise: Middle Class Living in a Chinese Metropolis*. Cornell University Press, 2010.

Tomba, Luigi. "Residential Space and Collective Interest Formation in Beijing's Housing Disputes." *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 934–51.

Residents' Committees and Neighborhood Deliberation

In contrast to the Party-state's tight political control and rigid administrative structure, Chinese urban neighbourhoods offer more inclusive and flexible space for deliberative activities. For example, in urban middle-class neighbourhoods, there exists the agent of the state (i.e., Residents' Committees), non-state organizations (i.e., resident volunteer groups), representative groups of the residents (i.e., homeowner associations), and market groups (i.e., the real-estate-developing and managing companies). Especially, residents' self-organized social activities and organizations serve as the resource pool for neighbourhood deliberation. The most popular ones are recreational activities, including group dance, choir, physical exercises (i.e., Taichi, basketball and table tennis, etc.), and educational programs such as calligraphy, painting and handcrafts. Usually Residents' Committees are not directly involved in the group activities. Those recreational activities have different forms and content from the campaigns under Mao. But one tradition remains—those activities target at a particular group of the population in order to mobilize the population as a whole. Those residents' recreational activity groups provide a resource pool to start recruiting active resident participants or volunteers to facilitate Residents' Committees' daily work. The active members of those groups are in frequent contact with Residents' Committee staff and help to liaison between the residents the and Residents' Committee and property management companies. Thus, the Residents' Committees are usually eager to lead or coordinate those group activities (*gao huodong*).

The role Residents' Committees play in neighbourhood deliberation, to a large extent, depends on the specific living environment of the residential communities, as well as the nature of the issues. For disputes between residents and issues in relation to the community environment in general, Residents' Committees tend to be more directly involved in the deliberation process. While in dealing with conflicts between residents and property management companies or between residents and the state, Residents' Committees are more likely to act as a coordinator and facilitator for neighbourhood deliberation. Residents' Committees shape the mechanisms of deliberation in middle-

class neighbourhoods with their particular influences on the quantity and quality of knowledge possessed by different groups regarding the issues at the centre, the capability to mobilize informal talks that shape opinion or will formation, and the capacity to provide both official and non-official communicative platforms.

Case Study 1 Direct Involvement and Leading Deliberation

Residents' Committees carry out their daily working tasks by keeping frequent contacts and establishing close personal relationships with the residents. This mass foundation has served as a platform of deliberation and offers a potential space for participation of multiple interest groups who are usually ignored in the formal institutional settings. Residents' Communities have rich knowledge about the residents' needs and the particular situations of the neighbourhood. That helps them to identify various interests groups as inclusive as possible. Since residents in middle-class neighbourhoods tend to have less contact with each other, in some situations, Residents' Committees are more likely to be directly involved and leading deliberation.

In community A, a group of residents had been complaining the noise and hygiene issues caused by the pet store on the compound which rent one of the property management offices, and they also reported that there were potential risks that the dogs would attack the children in the community when the pet store staff walked the dogs every day. Some residents requested the pet store to move. While other residents considered the pet store would provide convenience to look after their pets when they are away. And the pet store owners refused to move with the argument that they hold a valid contract with the property management company. While the property management company insisted on discussing the issue until the lease to the pet store would have expired. A group of residents visited the pet store multiple times but the visits usually turned into verbal insults and confrontation. In the end, the residents and the property management company invited the Residents' Committee to step in and mediate the situation.

The Residents' Committee sent a couple of staff to the pet store to investigate the problem, especially the issues of hygiene, noise and children's safety. During their multiple visits to the pet store, the Residents' Committee staff chatted with the pet store owners, regarding the difficulties and possibilities to create a cleaner and quieter environment, instead of moving out. The pet store owners considered the Residents' Committee staff had no direct interests in the disputes and the understandings of their difficulties shown by the staff made the pet store owners softened their tone and abandoned their antagonism. And then the Residents' Committee staff brought the messages back to the residents. They explained the pet store owners reasoning and suggested the residents to consider alternative solutions they would like to accept. Compared to the conversations with the pet store owners, the discussions with the residents were carried out in more causal and discursive manner. Sometimes the residents had the discussion when visiting the Residents' Committee offices for other business. Sometimes the Residents' Committee staff dropped by during the break of residents' social activities and had a quick chat with the residents. Or sometimes they randomly talked to the residents who were taking a walk in the residential compound. During those causal chats, residents discussed with each other and the Residents' Committee staff, regarding whether they should keep the pet store, and if so how to improve the situation. This process coordinated by Residents' Committee is crucial for the opinion and will formation among the residents. By the time when different interest groups participate in negotiation meetings, they already had a fair amount of knowledge about each other's demands and requests. And the meetings were more likely to focus on the practical solutions, rather than repeated complaints.

The Residents' Committee then organized a formal deliberation meeting, with representatives of residents, the homeowner association, property management company and the pet store. In addition, the Residents' Committee also invited a lawyer who is also one of their resident volunteers to attend the meeting, providing free consultation regarding the use and lease of the community space. According to the pre-meeting discussions with the residents, the Residents' Committee invited two

groups of resident representatives attended the meeting—those living close to the pet store and suffering from the noise and hygiene problems and those who would like to keep the pet store. At the meeting, the Residents' Committee identified the discussion priorities among which the noise and hygiene problem went first, followed by the safety issues and then the use of community space. The resident representatives and the pet store owners were more respectful to each other this time. The pet store owners first apologized for the problems, and then explained difficulties they were facing, such as the high cost of installing the noise-proof glasses. And the residents then asked the homeowner association and property management company whether they could cover some of the expenses. As a result, the expenses were agreed to share among the pet store, the homeowner association and the property management company. Also, the meeting reached an agreement regarding the specific time (3-5pm) of walking the dogs by the pet store.

After they reached this agreement, participants at the meetings showed more enthusiasm in looking for constructive solutions regarding the use of community space. The homeowner association argued that the root of the problem was that the property management company did not consult the residents regarding the use of the office rented to the pet store, nor did they get the approval from the homeowner association. The Residents' Committee then took the opportunity to push forward the transparency of the decision-making of and communication between the homeowner association and the property management company. Perceived as an independent and neutral party based on their previous activities, the Residents' Committee was in a more trustworthy position to mobilize participants with different interests. In the end, with the help of the lawyer, the homeowner association and the management company agreed on regulations of the use of community space for future references.

To a certain extent, Residents' Committees' direct involvement in neighbourhood deliberation is crucial for the inclusiveness and social capacity aspects of deliberative capacity building. As

mentioned the above, there are various interest groups involved in the conflicts, including residents, their homeowner association, the property management companies and other groups such as restaurants and pet stores in the neighbourhood. So far, it seems like the Residents' Committees are the only group that can get those interest groups to participate in deliberation. This is largely due to the nature of Residents' Committees as the agent of state authorities, as well as their organizational capacities developed through daily governance, as the next case study discusses in detail.

Case Study 2 Coordinating and Mediating Deliberation

Homeowner activism is a key governance issue in Chinese urban middle-class neighbourhoods. It is commonly observed that frequent disputes take place between property management companies and the residents represented by their self-elected homeowner associations. The centre of disputes between the homeowner association and the property management company tend to be the use of the Public Repair Fund. In principle, the Public Repair Fund is to be used for restoration and maintenance of the common facilities in the residential compound and it needs homeowner association's approval. However, in most cases, homeowner associations argue the property management company should pay for the repair and take the lead in repairing projects. For their part the property management companies often refuse to do so and expect the homeowner association to take the responsibilities. Thus, residents feel their property rights and collective interests are violated by the greedy and irresponsible property management company and collective discontent among the residents tends to spread quickly. In Community B, the residents requested using the Public Repair Fund to fix the problems of the lifts (in two buildings) and leaking in the walls (in five buildings). But the property management company argued that the problems only occurred to a small proportion of the buildings and thus they should not use the Public Repair Fund which was supposed to be used for common problems identified in the community. The residents were furious about the rejection and suggestion that the repairing cost should be paid by the residents in those affected buildings. They started organizing collective actions such as petitions, protests and even violent confrontations.

When it comes to questions regarding the use of the Public Repair Fund and the financial transparency of property management companies, Residents' Committees tend to be less directly involved. They usually use their organizational capacities to coordinate and mediate deliberative talks, both formally and informally. In the case of Community B, both the residents and the property management company turned to the Residents' Committee. The Residents' Committee then set up a deliberation group, composed of representatives of property management company, the homeowner association members and resident volunteers. The resident volunteers included resident group leaders and members of the neighbourhood CCP branches. Through the Residents' Committee's extensive resident volunteer network in the community, the resident volunteers in the deliberation group managed to represent each building. There were two key questions of the debates regarding the funding source for the repair and who (the homeowner association or the property management company) should take the lead and the responsibility to organize the repair project.

After identifying the key issues, the Residents' Committee mobilized resident volunteers in each grid to collect residents' opinions and to accompany the building manager to participate in preparatory talks between the property management company and the residents. And then it organized a meeting for the deliberation group on a Saturday afternoon. There were around 10 people who attending the meeting, including one representative from the lift company. The two-hour meeting focused on the solutions for the two issues. In the end, the homeowner association managed to use the Public Repair Fund and agreed to take the lead in organizing the repair project, while the property management company agreed to be in charge of the operation of the repair project. The deliberation did not end in the two-hour meeting. The Residents' Committee staff took the minutes of the meeting and then sent it to the Residents' WeChat (the most popular social media in China) group. With the use of social media, the deliberation has become more inclusive, with the extensive reach of the information to all groups being affected, especially the marginalized groups.

In this case, the Residents' Committee helped to organize direct communication, facilitated efficient communication and more importantly, pushed the transparency of the discussions among a small group of people to a larger group of the residents. During this process, Residents' Committees continue its function of monitoring residents' activities, but they have gradually withdrawn from decision-making. Instead, they place themselves in the position of issue identification and coordination. In this way, they have received more public support since the residents consider they are more impartial and helpful. On the other hand, the nature of Residents' Committees as the state agents leads to their needs in leading the deliberation to the "right direction". In this scenario, how to ensure the voices of marginalized groups are involved in the deliberation has become a challenge, which is intertwined with a traditional political strategy of CCP: the mass mobilization.

Resident Mobilization and Discursive Deliberation

For a functional deliberative system, it is important to accommodate both formal deliberation such as conventional government assemblies and more inclusive and informal deliberative gatherings among multiple actors and institutions, including civil society, media discussion, everyday talk and Internet exchanges. This "discursive turn" in deliberative democracy have influential impacts on the development of deliberative democracy in different political context. Especially when it comes to authoritarian deliberation, discursive deliberation offers inclusiveness—relatively speaking—of citizen participation, when citizens are normally excluded from decision-making within the existing legislature. In the context of Chinese urban neighbourhood governance, the driving force for discursive deliberation is resident mobilization through Residents' Committees. Residents' Committees usually consider each residential building as a resident group (*jumin xiaozhu*) which has two or three resident volunteers. The resident volunteers are like the glue to hold the governance network together in a Chinese urban neighbourhood. Through the activities of resident volunteers, neighbourhood deliberation is promoted as a governance mechanism that is largely operated through

residents' initiatives and volunteering, and thus reinforces the concept and practices of "residents' autonomous governance (*jumin zizhi*)" in urban neighbourhoods.

One target group for resident volunteer recruitment is the neighborhood Party branch and CCP member residents. Accompanied with the 'community building (*shequ jianshe*)' campaign which was launched in the mid-1990s in response to the work units' weakened function of social welfare provision,³⁶ has been the 'Party (organization) building in urban residential communities (*shequ dangjian*)'. The Party building in urban residential communities has been a key territorial strategy of enhancing Party building work at grassroots levels.³⁷ Take Community A as an example, 16 per cent of their resident group members are CCP members and over 50 per cent of the group leaders are CCP members. In Community B, there are in total 32 resident activity groups and nearly 30 per cent of the group leaders are CCP members. When organizing resident activities, the Residents' Committee usually provided a signing in list for the participants, with a question of "Are you a CCP member?"

Another important group to mobilize are the retiree residents in middle-class neighbourhoods. In middle-class neighbourhoods, the senior residents—aged between 60 to 80—have become one special group targeted by Residents' Committees to obtain public support. Among this group of middle-class residents, some retired from elite positions in government offices, public institutes and enterprises; some withdrew from their successful private business; and some moved from elsewhere to live with their children who are pursue a successful career in big cities. Generally speaking, this group of residents are economically well-off, secured with pension and medical insurance, and well-educated. They have a comfortable life and spend most of their time in their residential communities.

³⁶ Bray, David. "Building 'Community': New Strategies of Governance in Urban China." *Economy and Society* 35, no. 4 (2006): 530–49.

³⁷ *Opinions on Enhancing Party Building Work in Street Offices (Guanyu jiaqiang jiedao dang de jianshe de yijian)*, Organization Department of the Central Committee of the CCP, 1996.

The resident volunteers' work approach to facilitate neighbourhood deliberation follows the traditional Mass Line approach, that is, to mobilize and rely on a majority of the population to work on the minority. As shown in the two cases above, in some cases, resident volunteers directly participate in the mediation of the conflicts. In other cases, they are not directly involved in the mediation process. Instead, they actively monitor the residents' activities and report to Residents' Committees if they spot any potential collective incidents. And they also help to collect residents' opinions and clarify misunderstandings before the formal deliberation meetings. The resident volunteers in general have non-material incentives to take part in convincing the dispute parties to compromise. Those incentives are largely associated with their relations with the Residents' Committees, the authority they perceive to represent, and their CCP membership. During the interviews, the resident volunteers always emphasized on "I am not doing this for myself." They often refer to the Party leadership and the Mass Line which they believe have brought the legitimacy for their mediation activities.

With very practical and specific goals to achieve, Chinese citizens normally ask for intervention by a higher-level state authority in their disputes, or publicize their concerns through the media or the internet to attract the attention of higher-level authorities.³⁸ Neighbourhood deliberation is no exception. It requires effective reflection between deliberative activities in the neighbourhoods and the empowerment of deliberative (especially discursive deliberative) outcomes. Residents' Committees then maximize its instrumental role in connecting the public sphere and state authorities. Residents' Committees provide institutional coordination to carry out both the "transmission" and "reflection" process neighbourhood deliberation. The semi-official status of the Residents' Committees makes various interest groups think the deliberative talks coordinated by Residents' Committees will lead to some solutions reinforced by official authorities. It is interesting to note that

³⁸ Cai, Y. 2008. Social conflicts and modes of action in China. *The China Journal* 59: 89–109.

in some cases, the local police were also included in the WeChat group and they were invited by the residents. Because they consider it is important to have authority involved in the discussion process for the delivery of the deliberative outcomes. Therefore, both deliberative activates and other political strategies and elements of the Party-state, together featured neighbourhood deliberation in Chinese middle-class residential communities.

Case Study 3 Transmission of Deliberative Outcomes

In Community C, there are monthly regular meetings among resident representatives, resident group leaders and CCP member residents for collecting and exchanging information of residents' requests. Nearly 40 people attend those meetings every time. For issues that have the potential to cause larger-scale social unrest, the Residents' Committees report to their supervisory government offices. When residents in Community C heard that a PX (P-Xylene) project was planned to be settled in their neighborhood, they started to worry about the damage to the local environment. Within a couple of weeks, different versions of the stories and information with unconfirmed sources quickly spread out in the neighborhood. A group of residents then started to circulate a petition letter and to plan a protest in front of the government office building.

Through its 123 CCP member residents and other resident volunteers, the Residents' Committee in Community C transformed their monthly meeting into a more institutionalized form. The so-called "Community Deliberation Committee (CDC)" was formally registered as a civil organization under Residents' Committee C and its supervisory government office. The CDC then became the key venue for the residents and the local government to discuss the PX project. At the CDC held meetings among the residents, the volunteers on behalf of the neighborhood Party branch, explained to the residents why this neighborhood was selected to host the PX project and what harms this PX project would produce. Those are the key information the residents would like to know, but was missing in the official announcement. Through this act, the CDC gradually gained the trust from the

residents who consider it being fair in this situation. And then the CDC invited local government officials to meet the residents. At the meeting, the government officials explained the project plan would not harm the residential environment. But the residents were not convinced. They provided a list of the potential environment damages they were concerned about. The government officials agreed to take the information gathered through the CDC meeting back to their office, and to provide feedbacks through the CDC.

In addition, at the CDC meetings, the Residents' Committee suggested the residents to follow the petitioning procedures accepted by the government, rather than using illegal modes such as protests. When the residents received feedbacks from the local government, the CDC organized another round of discussions among the residents. Their feedback also failed to convince the residents. And the CDC then, on behalf of the residents, lodged a petition to municipal government offices. In the end, the government decided to have the PX project on hold and the residents agreed to reconsider the proposal with more provided information. In this case, the institutionalized neighborhood deliberation which is under the lead of Residents' Committees and engineered with resident volunteers, relates neighborhood deliberations with other governance strategies, such as resident mobilization. The CDC then has become an important dynamic to connect separate, informal deliberative outcomes with formal decision-making process.

Conclusion and Discussions: Authoritarian Deliberation under China's Party-state

With a particular focus on neighborhood governance, this paper examines in what ways and to what extent authoritarian deliberation is operated in the Chinese context. Along with the rise of private home ownership and urban middle-class residential estates, disputes and conflicts have risen between the residents, resident self-elected organization (homeowner associations), real estate developer and property management companies, and the local government. The local state, through their agent

Residents' Committees, actively adopts deliberative means to intervene and mediate the conflicts in those neighborhoods. During this process, deliberation has become an instrumental tool for conflict resolution introduced by local government to middle-class neighborhoods. Residents' Committees, on behalf of the state, become key coordinator and mediator during the deliberation process. The neighborhood deliberation goes hand in hand with other governance strategies. Through the recruitment of resident volunteers, Residents' Committees manage to mobilize resident participation, to facilitate not only deliberation meetings, but more importantly, the pre- and after-meeting informal talks which contribute significantly to the deliberative outcomes. Those deliberative practices on the one hand improve deliberative capacity of neighborhood governance by showing more tolerance of different opinions, more inclusiveness of participant groups, and more effectiveness of achieving agreements. On the other hand, those practices to a certain extent reinforce the party-state's leadership through mass mobilization led by the local state. Those findings lead to some further considerations regarding theoretical and practical implications of authoritarian deliberation.

First, the practices of authoritarian deliberation in China takes place in the context of local governance innovation which is endorsed and encouraged by the Party-state. Despite its rigid administration system and reinforcement of CCP's one-party rule, the Party-state has opened up space at local level to allow various forms of governance to enhance governance efficiency. Especially in urban neighborhoods, the so-called "residents' autonomous governance" has offered opportunities for various groups to participate in decision-making processes regarding community affairs. From the state's perspective, residents' organizations serve as a base for the "autonomous governance", and operate in a form of "co-governance" where multiple actors and organizations are involved in dealing with community affairs. If the "autonomous governance" of the residents places emphases on the recruitment of resident volunteers, then the "co-governance" highlights the participation of various interest groups. In this scenario, discursive deliberation plays a particular important role in authoritarian deliberation, since it fills in the gap between mass participation and

the exclusion and non-transparency of decision-making in the current political system. In the context of urban neighborhoods, discursive deliberation helps to disseminate information which is unavailable from official channels, mobilize discussions that allow different voices, and shape opinion formation through clarifying misunderstandings and reasoning. The degree of the flexibility and autonomy that local governance acquires determines in what ways and to what extent authoritarian deliberation can be effectively practiced to shape local governance mechanisms.

Second, the operation of authoritarian deliberation is a mix of deliberative elements and other features of political culture, traditions, strategies and institutions. CCP's Mass Line approach and its mass mobilization traditions have been continuously influential for deliberative activities in China. Also, authoritarian deliberation cannot isolate deliberation from involvement of the state authorities. Both formal and informal institution arrangements are crucial in conveying isolated discursive deliberative outcomes to the empowered space. For authoritarian deliberation, the question is more of whether and to what extent there is adequate, functional and coordinated institutional responsiveness to discursive changes, rather than eliminating non-deliberative or non-democratic elements of the existing institutions. From a systemic point of view, the mix of deliberative and non-deliberative features is a normal process for the development of a functional deliberative system where the non-deliberative parts can be compensated by deliberative elements later.

Third, the significance of authoritarian deliberation lies in the process of democratization in terms of improved democratic values and actions and citizen competency. The interactions between neighbourhood deliberation and residents' participation in community affairs could bring better social policies, but also the improved participatory capacity of a deliberative system. Participatory capacity could transform individuals and groups from deliberative actors—those who are involved in different sections of a deliberative system—to deliberative influences—those who can exert impacts on other participants' opinions through reasoning and in turn orientate the deliberative outcomes.

Therefore, neighborhood deliberation is not only to practice authoritarian deliberation at grassroots level, more importantly, it helps to shape grassroots governance in an authoritarian state through building deliberative capacities.

Authoritarian deliberation is of particular significance for political development in China. The participatory governance institutions currently functioning under one-party rule operate as structural anomalies within an endogenous system: the authoritarian state seems to be adopting deliberative institutions to legitimize its decision-making.³⁹ However, they are driven by and produce exogenous, non-institutional changes that are excluded from the political practices and ideologies of authoritarian rule, such as a stronger and more autonomous public sphere, more functionally coordinated state–society relations, and better-quality citizen participation.⁴⁰ CCP’s recent documents echoes this approach very well, which points out that the long-term goal is to develop not just deliberative democracy in a few places, but rather a “multi-institutional,” “complete system of deliberative democracy.”⁴¹

³⁹ He, B., and Warren, M. E. 2011. Authoritarian deliberation: The deliberative turn in Chinese political development. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9: 269–89.

⁴⁰ Tang, B. 2014. Development and prospects of deliberative democracy in China: The dimensions of deliberative capacity building. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 19(2):115-132.

⁴¹ Documents from the CCP Central Committee on February 9, 2015.