

# Grassroots Transformation in Contemporary China

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**ABSTRACT** *In recent years, urban community studies in China have been taking a closer look at neighbourhood space. Many researchers have examined neighbourhood using a state-society approach. This article argues that the fragmented state structure and the diversified society have led to calls for a different view of state and society. Based on the empirical studies in Shanghai, this article attempts to uncover the limitations of the state-society paradigm in exploring the transformation of urban grassroots, and suggests understanding the increasingly fragmented grassroots from examining different actors who are embedded in a specific neighbourhood space and vary in their interests and goals.*

**KEY WORDS:** Grassroots, transformation, state-society, community studies, China

Since the late 1990s, as China's urban community building has reached the residents' committee level, the neighbourhood has become an analytical unit for academic researchers. Along with the disintegration of the *danwei* (work unit) system, more and more researchers have begun to focus their attention on urban China's neighbourhood space. Generally speaking, research on China's urban grassroots has gone through two phases: *danwei* studies and neighbourhood studies. The social functions of the *danwei* system and its organisational structure have been explored by many researchers.<sup>1</sup> Neighbourhood studies appeared at a time when issues such as the growing population of migrants in cities, higher demands from urban dwellers on community services and the need for control over the urban grassroots after the collapse of the *danwei* system attracted the attention of both policy makers and scholars. Questions of whether and how new neighbourhood space could be shaped and to what extent this sort of space could replace the functions of the *danwei* system have become the focus.

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The studies on China's urban neighbourhood focus primarily on the social functions and self-governing system of residents' committees. For example, Choate (1998) and Read (2000) pointed out that residents' committees played a significant role in providing social services and maintaining public order in urban China after the breakdown of the *danwei* system. Along with the breakdown of *danwei* system, the state lost its direct control over the urban grassroots. In order to regain the state's control on grassroots space, a movement for neighbourhood-based community building emerged from the late 1990s. The content of community building varies from place to place. Generally speaking, community building includes work on six aspects: community organisations, community service, community culture, community sanitation, community environment and community public security. While Chinese central and local governments jointly launched this movement of community building, neighbourhood studies were advanced as a way of investigating the changes of grassroots space.<sup>2</sup>

Although previous studies on China's urban communities display considerable variety in their analytical positions, they generally share in common the state-society approach. The state-society framework derived from the experiences of Western countries. It pays close attention to the relationship between state and society, highlights the interactive relations between state-building and the growth of social space or the formation of civil society, and recognises the impacts of economic development on the progress of democracy. At the empirical level, China's economic reform and political transformation since 1978 are coincident with the theme of the state-society paradigm. State building, civil society and democratisation are hot topics in contemporary China and so both Western and domestic researchers prefer to adopt the state-society approach to explore the features and consequences of China's political transformation, with much attention devoted to the interaction of state apparatus and society.

The state-society approach has significant advantages in explaining China's experience because the reform process reshapes the relationship between state and society. It is easy to see that "state" has been an inevitable factor in the process of economic, social and political reforms in retrospect of the past 30 years. In this sense, it seems inconceivable for a theory aiming to explain China's socio-political reform not to include the "state" in its framework. However, as will be discussed in the following sections, the state-society approach has limitations when being applied to the grassroots level. Our view is that this approach has placed too much stress on a unitary perspective of state and society, viewing them as being in opposition with each other. In fact, the "state" is not an independent and homogeneous unity

(see Perry, 1994; Zhu, 2002). With the deepening of reform and the diversification of interests, the “state” is further disaggregated by different agents (see, for example, O’Brien, 1992; Rosenbaum, 1992; Shi and Cai, 2006). It is also difficult to view society as a distinct entity; rather, society appears as different social actors in specific circumstances (see Shi and Cai, 2006; Sun, 2000; Yu, 2001). In this sense, it does not sound reasonable to label various actors, each with their own distinctive characteristics as the “state” or “society.” However, the state-society approach faces a challenge from itself: what is the state and what is the society when state confronts society at the grassroots level? The fragmented nature of state structures and the diversified nature of society have led to calls for a different view of state and society. Based on the empirical data from research in Shanghai city, we argue that neither state nor society can be identified at the neighbourhood level; rather, what can be identified easily in the neighbourhood space are different actors with different interests and aims. In this context, “actor” refers to an agent with specific interests, including both individuals and organisations in the neighbourhoods studied. This framework is meant to provide clarity in the cases studied, rather than to develop a particular theory. In this article, the local rather than the national is the focus, since, according to Nevitt (1996: 26), it is at the local level that state and society come into the most direct contact. The local level refers to the neighbourhood space in an urban area.

### **The Study**

The data employed in this article were collected mainly in Shanghai. The first source was the observation of large-scale direct elections of residents’ committees in the second half of 2003. More than 20 local scholars from sociology and politics disciplines formed ten teams to investigate elections in different districts. The authors of this article formed an observation group that was one of these teams and conducted fieldwork at BCY and JX communities in YP District.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for selecting these two communities are because BCY and JX communities are typical in YP District in regard to population background, community structure and community surroundings, and also because the authors have personal connections in these two communities. Observation and interview methods were used. Investigation content included the whole process of direct elections and attitudes and behaviours of different parties involved, including residents, candidates, incumbent leaders of residents’ committees, and Street Office [*jiedao banshichu*] cadres.<sup>4</sup> The authors also collected seven research reports from other observing groups, which were conducting research at the same time in different communities in other districts.

The second source was the fieldwork conducted in 2006. The purpose of this research was to explore the structural system of community organisations and their relationships to each other as well as relationship between residents and communities. Intensive interviews were employed to understand community organisations and their relationships with each other. The interviewees were leaders of residents’ committees, directors of homeowners’ associations, homeowners in group interviews, directors of property management companies, and leaders of the main mass organisations, such as the elders’ associations, public security groups, and

entertainment/cultural teams in communities. A questionnaire for residents was also used. The survey content mainly included questions to elicit information regarding the methods used by residents for obtaining information, social intercourse between neighbours, residents' participation in community organisations, voluntarism and community participation, trust and reciprocity, as well as residents' evaluation of community organisations.

Twenty communities were selected and intensive interviews with homeowners and leaders of various community organisations were conducted in each community. For the questionnaire survey, 25-30 households in each community were selected based on equal-distance sampling.<sup>5</sup> An individual over the age of 18 was selected in each family using a random number table. Of the 20 selected communities, three refused to co-operate with the researchers, meaning that just 17 communities in Shanghai participated in the investigation. The researchers collected 451 residents' questionnaires and 17 interviews with each organisation (residents' committees, homeowners' associations, homeowners, mass organisations, and property management companies).

The third source of information comprised documents and working reports of Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau for the period 1999-2003. An officer who worked in the Division of Grassroots Political Power and Community Building [*jiceng zhengquan he shequ jianshe chu*], which is in charge of community building affairs in the Civil Affairs Bureau, gave the authors documents in electronic format regarding community building in Shanghai. These materials included 1045 documents on community building, reforms of grassroots administrative system, investigation of Street Office and residents' committees, working plans and work summary reports.

### **Grassroots Transformation in Contemporary China**

A major feature of China's urban transformation was the breakdown of the *danwei* system and the consequent efforts at community development and community building (Bray, 2006b). *Danwei* used to be the basic unit of urban grassroots organisation for the state. It was not only the channel for distributing all kinds of resources, but also the tool of state control over society (Hua, 2000; Solinger, 1995; Tang and Parish, 2000).<sup>6</sup> Walder (1986) and Whyte and Parish (1984) pointed out that *danwei* had played a significant role in China's political control system. In this institutional setting, individuals depended on their work units for basic life security and political participation. State power was embodied in the work units. Even though personal relations and informal ties articulated the implementation of work tasks in *danwei*, the top-down authority structure was the basic means of maintaining order and sanction. If an individual disengaged from the *danwei*, he or she would lose the basic security of life, such as health care, housing, education for children and other social benefits. Therefore, the *danwei* system gave the state a means of tightly controlling individuals. This system was maintained until about 1997 when reforms began in the *danwei* system.

In the *danwei* system neighbourhood space was marginalised. As Bray (2005) indicated, the integration of workplace and living space separated the *danwei* from each other. In this way cities were collections of independent workplace-based

communities, rather than integrated urban environments (Bray, 2006b: 4-5). *Danwei* members spent most of their time within the distinct spatial territory defined by their *danwei*. Residents' committees in neighbourhoods were the supplementary organs to manage the minority of people who were outside the system. Therefore, the management of Street Office and residents' committees had little chance to penetrate into the daily lives of most residents.

However, the urban grassroots has been transformed since the 1980s, which has changed the old political and social structure. First, the *danwei* compound shed its social welfare functions. This change was consistent with broader reforms that emphasised decentralisation and the separation of government and enterprises, as well as with the goal of establishing a modern enterprise system. Secondly, rapid economic development dramatically transformed cities in terms of both physical profile and economic and social life. The emergence of the private sector has provided new employment options, while the separation of workplace and living space has accelerated population movement. Thirdly, the construction of private commercial housing has diversified neighbourhoods in terms of both physical structure and population character. Private developers design and develop housing estates to accommodate people of different income levels. More and more residents in the same housing community are homeowners rather than *danwei* members. They come from a wide range of backgrounds and form their own organisations, such as homeowners' associations, to protect their housing-related interests. Meanwhile, the management of communities is transferred to private property management companies. These organisations are independent of each other with different interests, which articulates the key feature of new commercialism, where people in the communities buy their houses at market prices (Gui and Ma, 2007).

Research on China's urban communities has developed at the same time that the governance of the grassroots has become a key issue for government. Many studies examined community transformation using the state-society approach. To be sure, the state-society approach is useful for exploring the *danwei* system and its reform. But, when the state is disaggregated by different agents and society is becoming fragmented in terms of differentiated social actors, as this article seeks to demonstrate, the state-society approach appears to be less useful for understanding the transformation of the grassroots. The next section reviews the previous research in this field.

### **Research on Transformation: The State-Society Approach**

The wave of popularity for the state-society approach in China's urban community studies was associated with the expansion of civil society, and dominated scholars' understanding of the relationship between state and society following the Tiananmen event (see Bergère, 1997; Chamberlain, 1993; Goldstein, 1995; Saich, 1994; White, 1993a). This approach to modern civil society indicates that state and society are in opposition to each other and that society is more capable of self-governance than otherwise assumed. In the shadow of the binary perspective of state and society, much literature on China's urban community studies exhibits the following features: either emphasising state capacity to shape the developmental

space for societal organisations and individuals in the communities or emphasising the independence of society from state control and the growth of related social values. For the first set of analysts, the relationship between state and society is a form of inclusion, indicating that “society” cannot go beyond the boundary drawn by the “state,” no matter to what extent society enjoys autonomy. For the other group, the relationship between state and society is that of exclusion, underlining the significance of independent social areas. For the sake of discussion, we call the first literature “state preference” and the second one the “society preference” approach.

“State preference” regards the state as essential for understanding social transformation in urban areas. In China, the party and state are seen to penetrate widely and deeply to grassroots level. To some extent, the transformation at the grassroots level can be understood as new institutional arrangements and/or structural adjustments for better fulfilling the party-state goals. In this perspective, social autonomy exists at the grassroots level; similar with civil society or independent social spaces, it can be understood properly only within the framework of the party-state regime (Lin, 2003; Nevitt, 1996). Some researchers believe that the regime has reconsolidated itself and its legitimacy following the Tiananmen crisis (see Nathan, 2003; Perry, 2007). The way in which the regime rehabilitated its legitimacy was by developing a series of input institutions that “people can use to apprise the state of their concerns” (Nathan, 2003: 14).

In the state preference perspective, at the community level, the state regained control of society through the community building movement (Wong and Poon, 2005). Some observers viewed the increased autonomy and democracy at the community level as only one means of fulfilling certain political purposes rather than as a means of achieving some more fundamental ends (Gui et al., 2006; Lu, 1997). Read (2000) extensively investigated neighbourhood organisations in Beijing and Shanghai and found that residents’ committees were an administrative engagement at the grassroots level. That meant residents’ committees, which were defined as mass autonomous organisations by the Organic Law, actually served as administrative apparatuses of municipal government. Read (2003b) proceeded to point out that residents’ committees were neighbourhood organisations with “administrative grassroots engagement,” indicating that they were base-level networks to provide social services and implement policies through which the state could penetrate into people’s ordinary lives.

By moving toward a socialist market economy, China created political and social spaces over which the party-state had less control. But these surface changes had little power to alter China’s political system because the government’s concessions were limited due to its preference for control over every level of society. The reforms implemented at the grassroots level should serve the government’s purposes of improving its capability of solving local problems and providing more services (Derleth and Koldyk, 2004). Some studies surveyed the changing social space from the perspective of governance theory, and took a view that the adoption of governance patterns and the efficiency of governing were all determined by the state’s priorities. Based on his investigation of Shanghai’s community construction from 1996 to 2003, Liu (2005) employed the term

“community regime” to describe the newly emerging governing mechanism at the community level.

Meanwhile, the “society preference” perspective reveals the possibility that social transformation can generate independent social spaces at the urban grassroots level as continued reform in urban areas open new social spaces (see, for example, Davis et al., 1995; Wu and Ma, 2005). The disintegration and collapse of the *danwei* system impaired the traditional system of party-state control and generated a transformation from socialist political control to modern city management. In this sense, the community was placed at the forefront of renewed efforts to manage urban territory. As the *danwei* system broke down, workers lost their linkage with the work unit in terms of social services so that they had to look to the market and local government for the provision of services previously allocated by work units. These changes helped generate an environment in Chinese cities that some considered “liberalised” (see Benewick et al., 2004; Xu and Jones, 2004). The influence of social groups and individuals has increased along with the reform of social services at the community level (Wong, 1994). On the other hand, the privatisation of urban housing facilitates the proliferation of homeowners’ associations, which reveals the renewal of communities’ autonomy and, it is suggested, these organisations will eventually contribute to reshaping the relationship between state and society (see Shi and Cai, 2006; Tomba, 2005; Zhang, 2004). At the same time, the development of organisations, such as women’s associations and homeowners’ associations, and the emergence of social and economic elites produced and cultivated new social spaces at the grassroots level (see Howell, 2004; Pan, 2005; Saich, 2000).

The studies on community building that display the “society preference” identify several representative patterns of urban community development emerging in China’s cities since the second half of the 1990s. For example, the “Shanghai Pattern” is seen as state-driven, while the “Shenyang Pattern” is considered to emphasise a community orientation (Hu, 2005). Some analysts believe that these new communities have come to enjoy enhanced autonomy, with Bray (2006a) showing that communities started managing their own affairs, and even democracy in the course of community building (see Benewick and Takahara, 2002; Xiang and Song, 1997). Amongst Chinese scholars some also predicted positive impacts from the community building movement, believing that autonomous social spaces could be created in the context of building “small government, big society” (see Li, P. L., 2001; Xu, 1998) and could lead to grassroots democracy and autonomy (Chen, 1997; Feng, 2002).

This brief literature review illustrates how scholars have examined China’s grassroots transformation within the logic of the state-society approach. Essentially, they have tried to argue that the state remained strong or they have emphasised that various kinds of social spaces were opening up, contributing to the greater autonomy of grassroots society.

In fact, continued reform and the diversification of interests have fragmented both state and society and this trend seems to be continuing. As we will indicate, the perspective of treating state and society as united entities is inappropriate for explaining the current situation at the urban grassroots. The following two sections illustrate how state and society are increasingly disaggregated and fragmented by actors with their own concerns.

### **Who are the Representatives of State and Society?**

Supposing that the state-society approach can continue to be applied successfully to China's urban grassroots, it is necessary to distinguish the state conceptually from society and to specify its representatives. Until this is done, it is not clear how much is gained by using the state-society approach to understand the transformation of contemporary China. This leads to some straightforward questions: where are the state and society at the grassroots level? Can they be defined and identified easily? Do they have their own respective representatives? If so, who or what are they? Adequately addressing these questions suggests that it is a vain attempt to seek for an independent state and a distinct society.

### **The State in the Neighbourhood Space: What is it?**

What is the state? In form, the state is represented by different functional branches and departments. But is the state equal to the combination of these agents or one of them? Research on Chinese economic reform has revealed that different governmental organisations control different sectors and they have different agendas and priorities (White, 1993b). By using the empirical data collected in Shanghai in recent years, this section examines which government departments or subordinates at the grassroots level can represent the state.

The administrative system in Shanghai has been characterised as “two levels of government, three levels of management, and four levels of networks” [*liangji zhengfu, sanji guanli, siji wangluo*]. The two levels of government refer to the municipal government and the district government. The three levels of management refer to the management at the municipal, district and street level. The four levels of networks mean the administrative networks formed by the municipal government, district governments, Street Offices and residents' committees. According to the Organic Law, residents' committees are self-governing mass organisations in urban areas. In the past, however, residents' committees have never been self-governing organisations, but have rather served as an arm of local governments reaching out into the grassroots (Gui et al., 2006; Read, 2003b). The residents' committee is the place where the state meets society. Thus, in what follows, the resident's committee is the basic focus of the analysis, with some discussion up to the level of the Street Office or upper level governments when delineating cases.

Many observers have pointed out the important roles of residents' committees in civil affairs and social control in the neighbourhood, noting their long history a tool of government (Barnett, 1953; Salaff, 1967). Whyte and Parish (1984: 285) found that in the 1970s most urban residents viewed residents' committees as the representatives of local governments and the leaders of residents' committees were considered “cadres.” Read (2003a, 2003b) employed the term “administrative grassroots engagement” to indicate that residents' committees acted as state-managed organisations. Wong and Poon (2005) argued that, in recent years, residents' committees have continued to serve as the instrument of social control in urban areas. Other researchers also recognised the state-delegated functions of residents' committees (Gui and Cui, 2000; Liu, 2005; Zhu, 2002). But, can the residents' committee essentially be the state's representative in the community?

The problems associated with simply seeing residents' committees as loyal subordinates of local government, fulfilling the tasks prescribed by upper level government, is that one can actually neglect the fact that residents' committees can also be protective of their own interests. When Read (2003b) conducted interviews with residents' committee members, he felt that these members were unwilling to cooperate with him and it seemed that they had something that could not be told to outsiders. In terms of the difficulties he met, Read thought it was because residents' committees were sensitive to their role of being instruments of the state. In fact, though, residents' committees have more independence than this instrumental role suggests. In most cases, residents' committees skilfully make use of governmental campaigns to camouflage their interests.<sup>7</sup>

In our studies with residents' committees in Shanghai, we often met a reluctance on the part of committee leaders to answer interview questions. When they were considering their answers, they were often not telling the whole story. These leaders are sometimes afraid that they will be disadvantaged if some of the actions they have taken are considered illegitimate. This fear is the main reason why the investigators found it difficult to unearth the true intentions of the committee members. Residents' committee leaders do not always behave according to their assigned responsibilities or based on a voluntary spirit or the spirit of serving the residents. Rather, they are actors who try to balance the costs and benefits of co-operating with the upper levels of government. Pan (2002: 103) has pointed out that the rigorous control system provides opportunities for residents' committee members to take advantage of the system and bureaucratic resources to pursue their own goals. In dealing with the relationships with both the Street Offices and the residents, residents' committee leaders always think of how to satisfy both sides. One of the interviewed leaders told the authors, "Our priority is to give passable performances so that everybody is happy. We do not want to infringe upon the current situation." On the surface, it seems that residents' committees are dedicated to serving the residents and leaving it to the state to declare and enforce rules and regulations. But, behind this, the residents' committees follow their own logic.

Officially, the residents' committees are the subordinates of the Street Offices, but they are not their handmaidens. The Street Office and residents' committee are two different entities, not only because of their different positions in the administrative networks, but also because of their different understanding of community affairs (Pan, 2002). Street Office officials and residents' committee leaders also had quite different views on their relationship with each other. The Street Office officials considered the residents' committee members their subordinates, but the residents' committee members did not think they were appendages of the Street Office. During our investigations in 2004, some of the interviewed residents' committee leaders complained how incapable and inefficient the Street Offices were and how the Street Offices did things only for show and formalism. Sometimes, residents' committee leaders resisted and evaded the tasks assigned by the Street Offices when they did not agree on these agendas. They had various strategies of resistance, such as slacking off or skimping some tasks, playing for time and directly refusing to carry out certain tasks (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2003; Zhu, 2002).

Currently the residents' committees are more concerned about their own organisation's interests in the neighbourhood, in particular when it comes to the

emergence of new grassroots organisations. In many localities there is increasingly an intense competition for limited resources. In a recent paper, Gui and Ma (2007) presented information on how residents' committees, the homeowners' associations and the Property Management Offices sought to politically manipulate situations in ways that favoured their own group. When the residents' committee is put into a disadvantaged position, it will, above all, strive to protect itself. In view of the vigour of residents' committees in pursuing their own goals, it is inaccurate to describe them as mere delegates of state authorities.

One may argue that the Party branch in the local community functions as the representative of the state, or maybe that the Street Office represents the state because it deals directly with urban grassroots organisations. However, we feel that the Party branch is not likely to be the representative of the state because of the following reasons. First, and most importantly, in some communities the residents' committee director and the secretary of the Party branch are the same person. In other communities, where the director and the secretary are different persons, the Party branches are always combined with the residents' committees, that is, in a merger of Party and administrative powers [*dangzheng heyi*]. Secondly, the Party branch and the residents' committee rely on the same networks to carry out their tasks. The authors found that in most communities the signs of these two organisations were hung in front of the same office room or building. When enquiring as to the difference between these two organisations, the interviewed leaders confessed that they were "two signs, same staff" [*liangge paizi, yitao renma*]. This element of overlapping staff is reinforced by the fact that the core of the residents' committee is usually comprised of the main members of the Party branch. Thirdly, the Party branch often has the same tasks as the resident committees. The Party branch and the residents' committee usually provide a very similar picture on what they have done when they write an annual summary report. A recent investigation demonstrated that the secretaries of the Party branches felt it difficult and impossible to tell the difference between their work and that of the directors of residents' committees (Li, 2003).

This kind of arrangement undermines the influence of the Party branch in the neighbourhood. If the Party branch penetrates into the grassroots independently of a local organisation, it would represent the state politically. However, the reality is that the Party branch does not penetrate in this manner, but rather relies on residents' committees. As such, the Party branch cannot retain its organisational character because it loses its independence and its action and is assimilated by the residents' committee. Under such circumstances, the Party branch is more likely a "local" organisation, which does not extend its influence beyond its locality and no longer acts simply in response to orders from the state.

The Street Office is not likely to be the representative of the state either. In many cases, the Street Office does not take up matters itself, but rather assigns the tasks to the residents' committees. But, on some extraordinary occasions, the Street Office intervenes directly in the neighbourhood. The direct election of residents' committees is such an example. Taking Shanghai as an example, as the agencies of district governments, the Street Offices received the tasks to implement direct elections of residents' committees. But, the Street Office officials had quite different considerations when compared with the Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, the major initiator of

this campaign. Some Street Office officials considered some regulations of election impracticable, and criticised the Civil Affairs Bureaux, arguing that they were expecting to see the effect of propaganda and a “perfect” organisational procedure, rather than the realisation of genuine democracy. For the Street Office officials, the direct election was a formality; it did not demonstrate democracy in action.

On the other hand, residents’ committees can be the agency of Street Offices when they reach out into the grassroots. Before the direct election, Street Offices had complete control over residents’ committees, meaning that residents’ committees could be utilised to implement and execute administrative instructions effectively. One example is the SARS crisis, where Shanghai’s success in fighting this infection was credited to the effective management networks maintained by residents’ committees. However, some Street Office officials question whether residents’ committees will continue to co-operate so easily with the Street Offices in the future (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2003). If they govern themselves through mass elections, will autonomy result and lead to reduce administrative control and co-ordination? Under such circumstances, the Street Offices were unwilling to consider that residents’ committees could be beyond their control through the impact of direct elections. Our observations indicate that some Street Office officials were indeed worried about the increased autonomy residents’ committees gained through the elections.

So far, the issue of which body is the representative of the state at the grassroots seems self-evident. If the state is viewed as a monolithic, unitary entity, it would be difficult to explain why its subordinate organs manipulate the situation to their own favour. This phenomenon is prominent in the developing countries like China, where boundaries and rules are not clearly drawn. Lower and mid-level officials often have the possibility of changing the rules more to their own or their organisation’s advantage. Hence it seems more appropriate to define each government agency as an independent actor with its own interests rather than to consider it as an absolute and obedient subordinate of the state (Li, 2006).

### **Society in the Neighbourhood Space: Where is it?**

How then is society to be conceptualised in the specific context described above? There are naturally different definitions and understandings of society. Generally, a group of people who associate with each other for some reason and organisations that bind people together constitute the notion of society. The following pages discuss Chinese society at the grassroots level from two perspectives: individuals and organisations. The purpose is to analyse which body or bodies can be said to represent the society.

#### *The Residents: Do They Have a Sense of Community?*

At the grassroots level, society may be equal to the community. A sense of belonging to a certain community on the part of the residents and their participation in public affairs can shed light on how they understand the community and society.

According to our observation and studies by other researchers, residents are not active in the community-building movement in urban China.<sup>8</sup> Residents do not seem

to have a sense of an autonomous social unit that binds them together, but are likely to act as atomised individuals. To ordinary residents, “community” is only a term referring to the administrative area which they inhabit, rather than a functional organisation that is meaningful to them (Pan, 2002). Residents have a weak bond with each other. According to our 2006 investigations, respondents visited their neighbours roughly once a week. Liao (1997) and Wang (2002) also pointed out the trend of people becoming estranged in their neighbourhood life.

Are residents concerned with community affairs in general? Responses to this question from our 2006 investigation are presented in Table 1. When the respondents were asked to answer the follow-up question, “What activities have you participated in last year?,” they responded as shown in Table 2.

In sum, 389 out of 450 respondents answered the question in Table 1. The number of respondents who are uninterested in community affairs is greater than those who are a little interested or very interested in community affairs. This suggests that residents are rather unwilling to participate in community affairs. Table 2 shows that respondents maintain a low degree of participation in various community activities except for the ballot on the election of the residents’ committee (53.6%). As Gui et al. (2006: 14-17) pointed out, however, the high ballot rate does not indicate the active community participation of residents. Before the election, various levels of political activists engaged in propaganda work on elections, and personal connections were often exploited for political mobilisation. In order to “give them face; help them to fulfil their task,” the voters came out to vote on election day (Gui et al., 2006: 16).

**Table 1.** Residents’ interests in community affairs

Question	Answers	Frequency	%
In general, are you interested in community affairs?	Uninterested	177	52.9
	A little interested	170	37.8
	Very interested	42	9.3
	Total	389	100.0

**Table 2.** Residents’ participation in various activities

Activities	Frequency	%
Voted in election of residents’ committees	241	53.6
Voted in election of homeowners’ associations	111	24.7
Negotiated with the candidates for the elections of residents’ committees or homeowners’ associations	50	11.1
Participated in the work of homeowners’ associations	31	7.0
Made community issues known to government departments	49	10.9
Participated in forums and legislative hearings	51	11.4
Discussed community issues in online forums	8	1.8

In general, residents have an indifferent attitude towards the movement of community construction. Even on occasions where the government considered a community event important for the residents' life, many people seemed not active. A case in point is the 2003 election of the residents' committee in Shanghai. Even though the government attached great importance to this event, the residents were very involved or interested. In BCY and JX communities we observed that many residents did not know who won the election, and that they could not explain why they came out to vote. The authors observed that a number of voters completed their ballot papers without adequate knowledge of the candidates, and many voters even asked other voters to vote on their behalf.<sup>9</sup>

In BXL community, the residents' committee regularly organised cultural and recreational activities, but the residents did not participate or appreciate the efforts made. They did not attend the meetings of these activities, even though the residents' committee advertises these events repeatedly. One director said, "We organise community activities, but it is the same group of old people that comes every time. We try to invite more people, especially young people, but they do not want to come." The government working report also confessed that the bottleneck of community development was how to mobilise the masses (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, 2003). Our study indicates that most residents do not have a particularly great interest in community affairs, and many of them seldom participate in community activities. If residents do not regularly and extensively participate in community affairs as individuals, are they more likely to participate through formal or informal organisations?<sup>10</sup>

#### *Organisations in the Community: Representatives of Society?*

According to our investigations in 17 Shanghai communities in 2006, few local-level organisations can exert influence over residents' lives at the same level of the residents' committees and the homeowners' associations. Some cultural and recreational organisations exist in the communities; however, these organisations have a negligible impact on residents' lives because these organisations are established only to serve members' hobbies. Additionally, these organisations have a small number of members, and these members are almost the same group of older and retired people who cannot be seen as delegates of residents. Table 3 displays the sizes of recreational organisations in XJT community in P District.

As shown in Table 3, only a small number of residents engage in these cultural and recreational organisations. These informal organisations of overlapping membership, mainly involving the aged and retired, are meant to allow members to cultivate and practise their hobbies and have never settled any community issues in the names of these organisations. Residents' committee leaders recognised that these organisations had not competed for community resources because they were hobby groups rather than interest groups. Thus, it can be seen that these cultural and recreational organisations are unlikely to organise communities and become channels to represent the residents' interest.

The administrative role of residents' committees is a subject of much discussion in the academic literature (Gui and Cui, 2000; Gui et al., 2006). However, it is apparent that the residents' committee, like other community-level organisations, lacks

**Table 3.** Residents' participation in informal organisations in XJT community in P District, Shanghai

Organisations	Number of members
Elders' association	15
Family planning association	12
Women's representative committee	12
Chorus	10
Dance team	10
Boxing team	10
Public security group	7
Red Cross	5
Voluntary service organisation	3
Total	84

popular participation. The residents' connection to the residents' committee is often sporadic. As we have noted above, activities organised by the residents' committees cannot attract residents. Therefore, the residents' committee is not likely to be a channel for the residents to interact with the state; at least it has not been so far.

The homeowners' association is a newly emerging grassroots organisation in line with the privatisation of urban housing in China. The homeowners' association has demonstrated its significant role in protecting owners' rights in recent years. Can the homeowners' association be representative of society and represent the society in negotiations with the state? The authors are doubtful about this for three reasons. First, homeowners' associations deal only with matters related to housing. They cannot legally take up other social issues. As shown in Table 4, even when dealing with housing issues, residents were used to asking residents' committees for help, rather than the homeowners' associations. In communities 1 and 3, the residents' committees and the group heads mediated the disputes.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, due to the complicated housing allocation system in urban China, homeowners' associations do not exist in every neighbourhood. As seen in the case of community 2 in Table 4, there is no homeowners' association for this old lane [*linong*]. Thirdly, the state does not want to politicise homeowners' associations, but rather is happy to keep them as economic organisations. Read (2003a: 53-7) pointed out how unwelcoming the Street Offices and residents' committees were towards the homeowners' associations' ambition of sponsoring a community spirit in Shanghai and Guangzhou. In many cities, the government consistently delivers messages to community organisations that the residents' committee rather than other organisations is in favour with the state.

From the information in Table 4, two strategies to resolve matters of interest to residents can be identified. First, residents settled their problems without forming special organisations. In three selected communities, no special organisations were set up for dealing with community issues. We found that if issues involved just a few people, they solved the problems on their own. If issues involved many people, then they would gather together to deal with them. But they were not used to setting up formal organisations with leaders or organisational structures. Instead, they were

**Table 4.** Formal and informal organisations in three communities and residents' collective actions

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3
General background	<p>Location Type of housing</p> <p>XMGH in Z District New commercial housing</p> <p>1500 4700</p>	<p>PT lane in H District Old lane [<i>linong</i>]</p> <p>810 1900</p>	<p>XJT in P District Public housing sold to the residents</p> <p>260 780</p>
Social organisations	<p>Permanent households Permanent residents Formal organisations</p> <p>Resident's committee, homeowners' association and Property Management Office</p>	<p>Resident's committee and Property Management Office</p>	<p>Resident's committee, homeowners' association and Property Management Office</p>
	<p>Informal organisations</p> <p>Many informal organisations exist in this community, such as <i>Taijiqun</i> group and chorus. These organisations are organised by residents with the support from resident's committee and Street Office.</p>	<p>Two informal organisations, elder book club and boxing team, exist in this community. They have close relations with resident's committee so that they are considered subordinate to the resident's committee.</p>	<p>Many informal organisations exist, such as elder's association and family planning association. These organisations were launched by the resident's committee.</p>
Residents' participation in informal organisations	602 person-times	80 person-times	84 person-times
Competition among informal organisations	No	No	No

(continued)

**Table 4. (Continued)**

	Community 1	Community 2	Community 3
Collective actions in last two years	3	2	2
No. of actions	Low quality of the buildings and illegally produced documents.	(1) sanitation problems; (2) resolving street market problems.	(1) management issues for Building 31; (2) location of gas pipelines.
Causes	No	No	No
Set up special organisations	The resident's committee mediated the disputes.	The resident's committee mediated the disputes.	The group heads of buildings [ <i>louzuzhang</i> ] played the co-ordinating role.
Organisations helped solve the problems	No	No	No
Leaders/Organisers	Wrote joint letters and organised petitions	Wrote joint letters and appealed to the news media	Appealed to group heads of buildings at first, then group heads co-ordinated with resident's committee or the relevant government departments.
Ways and means	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved
Results	Partly achieved	Partly achieved	Partly achieved

convened for one specific case and purpose. After that issue was resolved, residents returned to the previous, atomised situation. Secondly, residents tended to appeal to the state-delegated residents' committees when they had to rely on an organisation. The two-tier functions of residents' committee, the administrative function and the social function, allow it to be the link between residents and relevant government organisations.

Residents appeared as atomised individuals who did not cultivate a close relationship with their neighbours and were unlikely to actively participate in solving community issues. Organisations cannot be considered the channels for residents to interact with the state, because these organisations have their own institutional limitations and lack an organising capability for the communities. Residents displayed a fragmented level of participation in community affairs and community organisations.

The term "community building" can be likened to an umbrella under which the powers and influences of various actors are at work. Government officials used community building as a tool to restructure the *jie-ju* system (relationship between the Street Offices and the residents' committees). The residents' committee members treat the community-building movement as a way to carve up a bigger piece of cake in the community. Due to their different interests and values, these actors conflict, co-operate and compromise and, to various extents, they are able to influence the campaigns and processes. Finally, the result achieved often does not favour any single actor, but is acceptable to all.

### **Interpreting the Actors: The Limitations of the State-Society Approach**

The examples given above reveal the fragmentation of state and society under the reforms, defying simple categorisation. It is difficult to distinguish clearly between state and society, but rather easy to see various actors with different values and interests, such as the Street Offices, the Party branch in the community, the residents' committees, and the residents. The complex situation suggests that it is not enough to interpret contemporary China only from the viewpoint of state-society dichotomy.

In fact, criticisms of the state-society approach have been addressed recently. Some scholars thought the Western binary perspective on state and society was inappropriate for China (see Bergère, 1997; Goodman, 1995; Huang, 1993; Nevitt, 1996; Saich, 2000). Other studies found that state and society were always overlapping and interpenetrating, and were disaggregated by various actors in pursuit of their own agendas (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Migdal et al., 1994; O'Brien, 1992; 2004; Shi and Cai, 2006; Sun, 2000; Unger, 1996; Yu, 2001; Zhu, 2002). For Perry (1994), the terminologies of "state" and "society" were too simplistic and could not explain regional differences and diversification in China. Different and diversified groups exist within the state such as different ministries and commissions – and these are further diversified at the central and local levels – Party cadres and administrative cadres, as well as between coastal and inland provinces. For the pursuit of their interests, different levels of governments and different government departments skilfully play a "swing role" in implementing regulations (Unger, 1996: 816). Similarly, society consists of various groups and classes too, such

as the emerging middle class, the owners of individually-run enterprises, socially disadvantaged groups, as well as intellectuals. It is difficult to simply categorise them into the state or the society.

A rough binary framework of state and society cannot provide a satisfactory explanation of China's transformation. Judging by certain indicators, the state still occupies a dominant position, and has even consolidated its influence and succeeded in mobilising capacity in some specific fields (see Perry, 2007); while other evidence suggests that society is increasingly breaking free from overbearing state control and developing considerably more autonomy. On the one hand, individuals are helpless when they confront state power; on the other, it can also be seen that the state cannot do much against the activities of local organisations and groups, such as on issues of environmental pollution and coal mines safety in production in Shanxi province. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to explain the capacity of the state. What we can see in reality is that various actors form complicated relations, oppositional, collaborative, contradictory and compromising (see Migdal, 2001).

To summarise, the limitations of the state-society approach lie in three aspects. First, it contains a binary and opposite relationship between state and society. As many studies have found, the relationship between state and society is symbiotic and, as such, the borderline between them is blurred. Secondly, this approach neglects the interest-seeking activities of actors – individual and corporate – in both state and society. The formation of a symbiotic relationship is not because of the “strength” or coercion by the state, but because of the pursuit of benefits that are important for both sides. Thirdly, the state-society approach suggests an integrated state and society. However, we argue that there is not an integrated state or society. State and society are disaggregated and fragmented by different actors with different aims. The interactions between these actors form the profile of China's transformation in all its aspects.

The new situation calls for different interpretative frameworks. These frameworks should concern not only the changes between state and society but also the changes within state and society. It should be able to interpret both the disaggregated state and the fragmented society. As Huang (1993: 216) suggested, a new framework formed from Chinese experiences is needed, and he advocated a framework of “the third realm,” which meant a space in between state and society. However, his third realm framework has the obvious limitation of not being able to adequately explain the origin of the third realm itself. Essentially, the third realm indicates that independent state and society still exist and so does not break through the limitations of the state-society approach. As analysed in the previous sections, what can be seen in the grassroots are different actors with different aims. Thus, new frameworks should be concerned with these different actors and interpreting their actions in specific circumstances and under specific conditions.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the empirical data collected in Shanghai, this article revealed some of the limitations of the state-society approach in interpreting the transformation of the grassroots in contemporary China. Research on China's rural areas and through

contentious urban actions has also indicated that the state and society are disaggregated (see Shi and Cai, 2006; Sun, 2000). This article further illustrated that, in the process of social change, multiple actors shape the profile of the transformation. We believe that a theoretical framework drawing from the Chinese experience should be able to recognise the actual process of social transformation as well as be sensitive to action strategies of different actors.

In view of the limitations of the state-society approach, a new analytical framework should first view the relations between different actors as symbiotic and co-operative, conflicting and compromising, rather than binary and opposite, coercive and submissive. Secondly, it should take a disaggregated perspective of state and society, acknowledging that different actors with different aims need to be considered in the interpretation of China's transformation. Thirdly, it should recognise that individual and corporate actors are interest-seeking. Actors interact with each other and seek resources of importance to them and develop appropriate strategies for particular circumstances.

In the existing literature on China's urban community studies, a few have investigated the urban grassroots from the angle of analysing various actors. Li, Y. M. (2002) analysed three core organisations in urban communities: the homeowners' association, the Property Management Office, and the residents' committee. She regarded these three organisations as different actors who were inclined to maximise their own interests. By examining the course of interaction, Li discussed the issues of power, conflicts, co-operation and regulations under the specific neighbourhood context.

To an extent, this article assessed the state-society approach using a perspective of actor analysis. We showed how the Street Offices, the residents' committees and the ordinary residents understood the direct elections of residents' committees in different ways. In fact, there are many actors involved in the implementation of direct election of residents' committees: different levels of government, members of residents committees, the candidates, the residents, and researchers of the government think-tanks. These actors were engaged in this issue with different expectations and values. The municipal government cared for the impact of elections. The Street Offices were worried about whether they could control the residents' committees after direct elections. The incumbent members of residents committees complained of the formalism of direct elections and treated these tasks as ordinary assignments that had to be completed. Candidates' momentum to participate in the election did not come from their deep understanding of democracy or a sense of civil representation, but rather from concern for other aspects, such as the salary associated with the job (Gui et al., 2006).

This article also suggests that research on the transformation of China's urban grassroots is best pursued through an analysis of the various and diverse interaction among different actors. This approach allows focusing on strategies such as competition and co-operation, conflict and compromise which are used by the actors to realise their goals. For establishing a systematic framework of actor analysis, there are some elements that need to be specified, such as how to define "actor" and how to identify various actors in a complex context. This article suggests defining and identifying actors according to interest clusters and the extent to which actors are

organised as well as the structural status that they occupy in a specific space. Definitely, more empirical studies are required as well as more theoretical discussions in order to give satisfactory answers to the fundamental questions raised in the processes of community development in urban China. Future studies may find it useful to focus on the fundamental issues around an analysis of the various actors involved in this process.

### **Acknowledgement**

Research for this article was funded by the Sociology Division of the E-institute of Shanghai University, Shenzhen University, China's National Social Science Foundation (project no. 05CSH17), China's Education Ministry (project no. 05 JA840004), and Shanghai Education Development Foundation (2006 *Shuguang* Project). The authors express thanks to these funding agencies. Thanks also to the anonymous referees and the editors for valuable comments and Dr Linda Li Che-lan for her insightful suggestions and Huang Ronggui and Li Jiejun for their efforts on data collection.

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> There are extensive studies on China's *danwei* system. Some scholars are well known for their outstanding research in this field, such as Bian Yanjie (1994), David Bray (2005), Li Lulu (2002), Barry Naughton (1997), Jonathan Unger (1996), Andrew Walder (1986), Martin K. Whyte and W. L. Parish (1984).
- <sup>2</sup> See Benewick and Takahara (2002), Benewick et al. (2004), Gui et al. (2006), Liu (2005), Wong and Poon (2005), Wu (2002), Xiang and Song (1997) and Xu and Jones (2004). In China, articles related to community studies were frequently published by several first-class journals in the 1990s, such as *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [*Sociological Studies*] and *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* [*Social Sciences in China*].
- <sup>3</sup> The interviewees wish to remain anonymous, so we use abbreviation for the community and district names.
- <sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, the Street Office [*jiedao banshichu*] is not one level of government, but it undertakes major management functions in Chinese cities. It is the representative of district government in Shanghai (Wu, 2002: 1083).
- <sup>5</sup> In a community, we first put all the households into order, and then selected one for each 30.
- <sup>6</sup> See also note 2.
- <sup>7</sup> This pattern is also seen in other government agencies who have their own interests that are not always expressed in open or public ways (see Goodman, 1997; Granick, 1990; O'Brien, 1992).
- <sup>8</sup> For residents' participation in community affairs in Beijing, see Read (2003b); for that in Shanghai, see Ma et al. (2000), Zhu (2002) and Zhang, W. (2001); for Nanjing, see Li, T. Y. (2001), Zhang, L. (2001); and for Kunming, see Chen (2003).
- <sup>9</sup> In order to ensure a higher degree of participation rate, a resident who does not want to come out to vote is allowed to ask someone else to vote on his or her behalf.
- <sup>10</sup> Informal organisation refers to those who do not register with the government. Formal organisations refer to those who are registered. Owing to strict registration procedures, many organisations do not register. Organisations mentioned in this section are informal except for residents' committees and homeowners' associations.
- <sup>11</sup> The group heads of buildings are co-ordinators between residents' committees and residents. Group heads assist residents' committees in most community affairs on the basis of voluntary co-operation.

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