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Community Governance and Social Capital Accumulation in Shanghai

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, there is a growing research interest about the role of social capital in deepening democratic politics and making sustainable development and economic prosperity (Coleman, 1990; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Fukuyama, 1995). Social capital is widely defined as *resources* that actors may access through social ties (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). As a particular feature of social life - networks, norms and trust, social capital can "enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 1995:664-5). While the proponents in this camp vary, a general claim is that social capital, as a relational resource, is the building block of civil society, the solution to social dilemma and the source of collective efficacy, and it can make governance more sustainable.

If social capital is such an important social asset, how can it be generated? The fascination with the concept of social capital has been mostly directed to its impacts, leaving the origin of social capital less understood. Furthermore, while much work seeks to understand social capital in the liberal democratic institutions, fewer studies have been done on the formation of community-level social capital under authoritarianism.[1]

This study sets out to explain the dynamics and impact of neighborhood social capital accumulation in urban Shanghai. Neighborhoods have long been imaged as the soil in which "free space" arise, and where we find the potential for civic culture, for the realization of the common good, and for the fulfillment of the democratic promise (Ferman, 1996: 13; Evans and Boyte, 1986). In the contemporary Chinese urban society, neighborhood is an administered space officially organized by the state-led Residents Committee (RC), which serves as the primary agent of policy implementation and social and economic transformation of the localities (Whyte and Parish, 1984; Pan, 2002; Read, 2012). During the last two decade, such a pattern of community organizing has undergone enormous changes in the general scheme of "Urban Community Building" (UCB),

1 Chen and Lu (2007)'s research on reservoir of social capital in Beijing is an exception. They found that there are positive relationships between social capital and resident's confidence in the popularly elected residents committee, support for self-governance norms, and activism in self-government.

an effort envisioned to increase residents' community engagement and incorporate various neighborhood-based groups into grassroots political process in a deliberative and participatory fashion. This grassroots experience raises interesting questions on whether and how a certain form of civic ties can emerge within the neighborhood.

The central theme of this paper is that new approach of community organizing may generate opportunities and resources for neighborhood social capital accumulation. While administrative community governance may contribute to top-down state control by breeding selective individual dependence, the emergence of issue-based deliberative institution - as can be found in the experience of urban community governance reform in Shanghai - has become an important source of information about the reliability and capabilities of their neighbors, and it functions as a salient springboard for collaborative interactions among the residents.

This paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I provide some theoretical considerations on the logic of social capital formation, namely, whether and how can state intervention shape social capital accumulation under authoritarianism. I then show the evolution of neighborhood governance reform in Shanghai. Next, I muster ethnographic evidence to show how community governance restructuring has been fostering new patterns of social interaction that help accumulate social capital at the neighborhood level. I conclude with a discussion on the implication of state-led social capital in China's local governance transformation.

Sources of social capital

Although there is a wide consensus about the merits of social capital, we still lack a common and clear definition of it. While Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) conceptualize social capital as a feature of groups that resides not in individuals but in the relations between individuals, Putnam (1993) and many development theorists (Evans, 1996) bring it into macro sociological theory by claiming that social capital could be aggregated and ultimately functioned as a resource to solve collective action dilemma.[2] In this paper, I assume a broad definition of social capital that Grootaert and van Bastelear have proposed: "the institutions, relationships, attitudes, and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development" (2002:2). According to this definition, social capital is the result of the use of resource through interpersonal

2 For an overview of different conceptualizations of social capital in the literature, see (Newton, 1997; Portes, 1998; 2000; Jackman and Ross, 1998)

engagement. The broad definition serves the purpose of this study, that is, to explore the dynamics of trusting ties and public engagement within the residential community.

While rational choice theorists have attempted to explain social capital through an evolutionary account, as something that develops over repeated interactions between two self-interested actors in a dyadic relationship, the so-called "Tocquevillian Model" tends to associate the formation of social capital and trust with variables such as "civic culture" (see for example, Brehm and Rahn, 1997). It is often argued that voluntary organizations can help provide social capital and sustain co-operation once it has begun. Such an approach, however, is not without problems. As Whiteley (1998:6) notes, it fails to explain how social capital might emerge from a primeval state of non-cooperation.

Recent studies on social capital stress the importance of the institutional factors. It is argued that for social capital to emerge and flourish, it needs to be embedded in and linked to formal political and legal institutions (Levi, 1996; Tarrow, 1996; Rothstein and Stolle 2003; Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Paraskevopoulas, 2010). According to this line of thinking, social capital does not exist independently of politics or government in the realm of civil society. Rather, it is created, channeled and influenced by government policies and political institutions. Institutions may exert an independent effect on trustworthiness, and thus on how social actors trust or distrust each other. Essentially, institution matters because civic activity is not a natural phenomenon (Skocpol, 1999).[3] In Tarrow's words, "state plays a fundamental role in shaping civic capacity" (Tarrow, 1996:395). Political authority that performs well and equitably contributes to the "trust, norms, and networks" (Putnam, 1993:167) that enable people to solve collective action problems (Kenworthy, 1997). Institutions that require more citizen input may also provide an impetus for people to become engaged in something other than their private lives (Schneider, et al. 1997).

Addressing state-society synergy in developmental issues, Heller (1995) examined the relationship between state intervention and social capital formation. As the case of state of Kerala in India indicates, developmental successes are closely tied to the exceptionally high levels of social capital, which is matched by the activism of the state. Class mobilization and state interventions, which aimed at providing public goods, have built directly on

3 Further to Tocqueville, Skocpol (1999: 298) illustrates other institutions in the American context that can foster civic engagements which include religious competition, ideas about personal initiative and civic duties, the structure of elections, Congress and state legislatures' openness to petition drives, the growth of newspapers. It is also demonstrated that historical factors have also triggered major periods of associational growth (Skocopol at al., 2001).

existing social capital resources and have in turn reinforced social capital. In a similar vein, Fox (1996) studied the "thickness" of civil society in rural Mexico by stressing the role of "extra-local horizontal linkages":

> *As we know from the Mexican experience, the classic formula of 'cooptation when possible and repression when necessary' usually works. Divide and conquer tactics are most effective where local movements are isolated, so the key question becomes when and how social actors become able to build horizontal links between often disconnected or divided local social actors. If one surveys the rich diversity of experiences in rural Mexico, it turns out that where such extra-local horizontal linkages have emerged, external allies, whether embedded elsewhere in society or in the state itself, have often contributed greatly to the process (1997:4).*

In the rubric of what he called "political construction approach", Fox contended that reformists in less-then-democratic regimes may create positive incentives for collective action from below, and buffer the negative sanctions that other state actors usually deploy against autonomous collective action. This further suggests that social capital does not develop out of institutional vacuum under authoritarianism. While the accumulation of social capital could be explained as a consequence of preexisting trust and generalized expectations of reciprocity in a liberal democracy context, such a process depends heavily on a broader institutional dynamics in the authoritarian context. As will be elaborated, institutional linkages provides crucial contextual opportunities, organizational resources and incentives that promote or inhibit social capital accumulation among the residents.

Nested in the Chinese urban governance, the institution of RC does not fall completely into an image of absolute control over the neighborhood life except in extremely situations.[4] While RC is obligated to assist government policy implementation, it is legally defined as a self-governing body in the Article No. 111 of the Constitution (the 1952 version). It is "mass self-managing organization at the grassroots level" for "self-administration, self-education and self-service". In reality, RC carries a dual function of both top-down administrative control and bottom-up voluntary participation. According to Mok (1987), such a pattern of community organizing echoes "the principles of self reliance and community orientation in socialist construction" where "local people are encouraged to infuse new life into themselves through their own efforts". In addition, neighborhood

4 RC might have coercive power and even conduct political persecution in Mao's China, as pointed out by Whyte and Parish (1984), that it possessed considerable capacity to apply pressure to residents and make life difficult for them if they got out of line.

governance reform may open window of opportunity for social interaction, generate resources and selective incentives for local residents and activists to engage with each other. Newly created institutions and governing process would prove instrumental in motivating community participation. As a response to the liberalization of neighborhood governance institutions, residents are likely to be motivated in social engagement through which they can control the community. It is with such a changing action context that some form of reciprocity and trust within the community may be spurred and reinforced.

Reconfiguring Community Governance

Community-based mobilization has been widely considered as the key to local governance and sociopolitical transformation in China. Numerous studies have shown the power of volunteerism in China's communist revolution. In both everyday politics of the community and the dramatic events of political campaigns, stat-led activism emerge and serve to overcome the gap between leaders and masses. Indeed, vibrant mobilization of voluntarism indicates the concept of mass line as "a particular instance of the CCP's desire for a generally high degree of activism and political consciousness among the people" (Townsend, 1967: 75).

In urban residential community, the prevailing form of state-led mobilization is constructed and crystallized by what Benjamin Read called "administrative engagement institution" of RC (Read, 2012). Situated at the bottom of governing structure in urban China, RC functions as the geographically based components of sociopolitical control by informally engaging a group of community activists, who may not hold formal leadership positions in RC or the Party's neighborhood organization but substantially connected the state-led RCs and ordinary residents. Over time, RCs with its affiliated grassroots activists have a decisive role on community-level problem solving. They would help dissimilating information, and occasionally help distributing goods and delivering services to the neighbors living in their vicinity.

Rapid urban transformations since the 1990s have shifted tremendous social functions and occupational welfares from the work unit (*danwei*) system to the local community, and thereby adding the administrative burdens of local governments (Lee 2000; Chan 1993; Wong 1998). In addition, various new neighborhood-based social and cultural spaces have emerged as a result of housing privatization, increasing leisure time and social autonomy (Davis et al. 1995). These dynamics have triggered a phenomenal process of community governance reconfiguration in the national scheme of urban community building since late 1990s. Local authorities have been encouraged to conduct experiments

of institutional reforms for strengthening grassroots governability and promoting community-based participation and service delivery.

In Shanghai, an integrated framework of "two layers of government, three layers of administration" was formulated by the municipal government in 1996. The street office was established as "the third layer" of urban administration and authorized with greater jurisdiction in community service and social regulation (Shi and Pan 1998). Meanwhile, RC was revitalized as the fourth level of urban governance with overwhelming top-down administrative work assignments. According to the "Policy Paper on Strengthening Street Office, Residents Committee and Community Management in Shanghai," issued by the Shanghai municipal government in 1996, the street office was converted from a "subordinated agency" of the district government to a community-rooted governing agency with regulatory functions. It stipulated that the administration area of each street office should be reconfigured and standardized to cover five square kilometers (or about 100,000 residents). Second, the standard quota of every street office's "approved positions of public servants" was increased from approximately 55 to 60. Third, to change its previous marginal status in the urban government, the street office was to receive more autonomous financial resources via a new street-level fiscal system. The overarching district government would be responsible for funding the street office through fiscal transferring.

Despite that decentralized governing framework has largely expanded the scope and reach of the administrative state; it offers few bottom-up channels and incentives for ordinary residents to participate in the communitywide decision-making process. The Shanghai approach of community governance has thus been reflected for being too "bureaucratized" in contrast to the experiments in other cities like Shengyan and Wuhan, which boasts heavier bottom-up initiatives. Indeed, from the perspective of RC cadres, one of the major obstacles to UCB is the lack of spontaneous voluntarism spirit from residents. The low degree of voluntary community participation in Shanghai places RC and the street office in an awkward position that does not meet the policy vision of UCB.

To extend the street office and RC into the increasingly complicated urban fabric and make more possibilities for residents' engagement, policy reorientation has been adopted in late 1990s by altering the previous pattern of neighborhood administration. An evident reconstruction from "administrative integration" to "democratic empowerment" began to occur, aiming to empower local residents and obtain representative inputs in the neighborhood political process (Liu 2008). The most prominent measure for this end has been the promotion of RC direct election, which was piloted in 1999 in two street offices,

and expanded to over 1,000 RCs, or 30 per cent of the total RCs in 2003. In 2006, more than half of the RCs in the city were reorganized by direct election. The election in 2009 witnessed 84 per cent of RCs reconstructed by direct election with an average voting rate of 86 per cent (SBCA 2009). By giving residents a voice in neighborhood governance and strengthening the representation capacity of RC, urban grassroots election paves ways for community-based participatory politics.

To advocate grassroots self-governance, the post-election administration of RC is reconfigured with the principle of "separation of deliberation and administration" (*yixing fenli*), which offers "voluntary positions" in the RC. Official statistics reports that 33 per cent of the elected RC cadres work in a voluntary mode in 2009 (SBCA 2009). Meanwhile, paid professional social workers, regarded as "administrative force", are hired by street office to serve the voluntary RC members.

A complementary policy measure to expand bottom-up engagement is to organize advisory body to RC, which takes the form of the "deliberative assembly" (*yishi hui*) in many neighborhoods. A model deliberative assembly was pioneered in *Jing'ansi* street office in 1996, which was designed with four principal functions: raising suggestions for local public affairs, mobilizing residents and homeowner associations to engage in community problem solving, exploring residents' attitudes towards the RC's work, and cooperating with the Party's neighborhood branch. In *Huashan* neighborhood under *Jing'ansi* street office, for example, the deliberative assembly consists of 13 members, 10 of whom have college or university education and high social reputations in the local community (Lin 2002: 206).

In 2010, a more systematic experiment was developed in association with the Shanghai Expo. To articulate the Expo theme of "better city, better life", the city government identified 21 "model self-governance communities" and explored self-governing mechanism from within the community. The overall goal of this project is not completely new as can be found in the previous reforms: to innovate the institutional space for local residents to engage in community problem solving. New strategies of neighborhood organizing assume that community problems need bottom-up initiatives rather than simply relying on feeder institutions such as RC and the overarching local government. This orientation leads to a further round of experiments of community governance reform, and provides a good opportunity to probe the coevolution of community governance reform and social capital accumulation.

Social capital accumulation in Gulong

In 2010-2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Shanghai and observe the implementation of "model self-governance communities" project. Key research concerns are: how is this project implemented on the ground? To what extend can this project make sustained grassroots participation and shape social relations that are heralded by social capital and civil society theorists?

A popular approach in the model self-governance project is to explore solid platform of social engagement that goes beyond the grassroots administrative network that extensively used by the local government. In *Gulong*, a newly established gated residential community under the jurisdiction of *Gumei* street office of *Minhang* district government, which is home to 962 registered families and 2,300 residents, a "community caring committee" was fostered by RC as a main channel for resident participation. In the eyes of Mr. Zhou, the RC director in Gulong, "The starting point of organizing an active community, as we did in Gulong, is to facilitate residents to organize by themselves, not delivering public service from the government. It made no sense to make symbolic participation in such community where residents are well educated and most of the residents are white collars and professionals. In addition, residents are more informative about their problems, more conscious about their own resources; they can define their way of participation, as well as the issues to be discussed. In Gulong, they might be preoccupied with knowing each other within the community, instead of turning to local government for material supports."[5]

The community caring initiative in Gulong was actually initiated and managed by some volunteers with a vision of "living in harmony, living with quality". The coordinator, Mrs. Xu is a community-spirited Chinese communist party member. She has retired from a state-own enterprise and she has been thinking about resident's self-governance from a social perspective: "we may need to know each other in our community just as we did in our danwei (work unit), otherwise you don't have a sense of security. Without security, there is no quality of life. I believe families in our community can always find a good way to interact with each other, and once people can be better connected, and we can be more informed with our community's problems and resources. And, helping each other is congruent with government's expectations, so it is not a problem for us to work with RC."[6]

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5 Interview, 16 June, 2011.

6 Interview, 16 June, 2011.

The community caring committee has turned out to be a multi-functional socializing space with lots of group discussions about community affairs. With the support of Mr. Zhou, the caring committee took an important effort to figure out a list of resourceful residents (mostly professionals) in the neighborhood. Together they paid a visit to those "resourceful residents" and established contacts. Eventually eight of them volunteered to be coordinator for the committee, taking care of environmental and cultural affairs. For example, Mrs. Sun, one of the eight coordinators, is leading a small group of volunteers for "pet club" through which they help advocate a "civilized habit of pet raising". The club has a regular meeting in the first weekend of each month and they invited RC to sit in the meeting and share the information and inputs about how to regulate the pet-related problems. In addition, Mrs. Sun initiated a "green group" in which the volunteers work closely with the housing management company to register trees and flowers in the community and promote waste recycling.

Mr. Zhou was not staying away from these bottom-up initiatives, instead, he offered helpful hands by supporting the caring committee to figure out community problems and mobilize resources. According to Mrs. Xu, "This is a harmonious way of cooperation. We trust each other and often we handle problems together. For example, we find that one of the most common concerns by many young parents is that kids lack a good collective learning environment in our backyard. Some parents suggested that kid should have an opportunity to learn together in Gulong, and that kids can learn better together than just learn with parents." [7]As a response, Mr. Zhou and our committee members start to organize a kid reading club. Mr. Zhou also helped recruit some literacy teachers to the club with the aid of street office. The reading club was led by Mrs. Ge, who is a mother of a 4-year-old son and it became an exciting source of family interactions in the community.

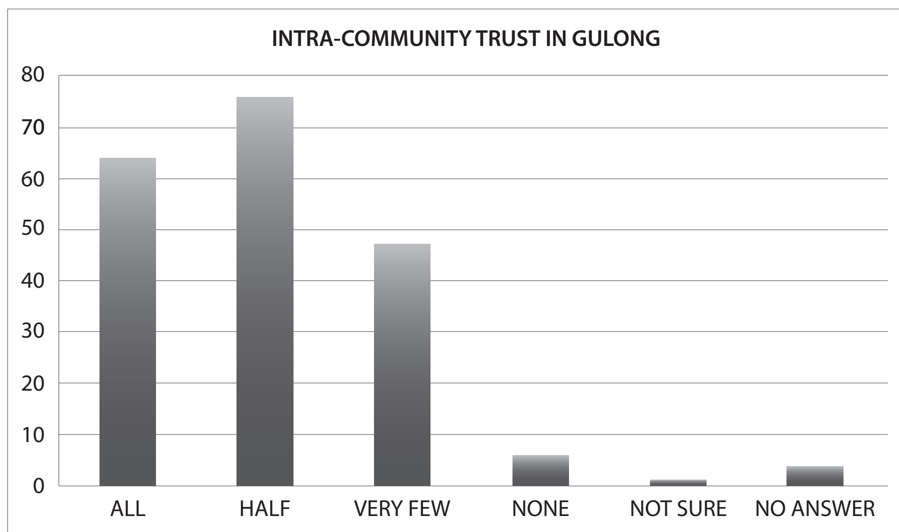
With the role of RC changed from a control agency of local state for policy implementation to a facilitator of residents' participation, more bottom-up initiatives have been emerging, which in turn have made RC more responsive. In December of 2011, the community caring committee launched a "competition and exhibition of best picture in Gulong", which encourages residents to showcase their photography about the Gulong community. This program was again co-organized by RC and got a generous financial donation from several private entrepreneurs who are also local residents. Through two rounds of voting by the committee and a professional advisory group, twelve pictures were finally selected for the awards and they were printed as a "Happy New Year of 2012 Calendar". The

7 Interview, 18 June, 2011

calendars are distributed to every family as a gift. Now this best Gulong picture award has become an annual routine activity that enjoys high popularity among the local residents.

As a result of these interactions, a participatory norm can be felt in Gulong which has made common problem solving more effectively. In 2013, a small-scale survey (N=198) was implemented by RC to gauge the popular support for RC-led mutual-help caring committee. This self-administered survey (n=198) showed a positive of social life in terms of interpersonal trust. When asked, "how many residents would you like to trust in Gulong", about 23% (n=64) of the correspondents think "all the residents are trustable", still 38% (n=76) believe that "half of the residents are trustable". The survey is by no means complete. Nonetheless, it reveals that, with the function of community caring committee, more and more residents are willing to trust and contribute to joint efforts in Gulong community.

Table 1. Interpersonal Trust in Gulong Residential Community



Source: Gulong Residents Committee Office (2013)

Concluding Remarks

As Tony Saich commented more than a decade ago, the neighborhood in which grassroots participation is practiced, should gain greater stake in the Chinese politics "with the expansion of the non-state sector of the economy and the work-unit providing less in terms of housing and social welfare benefits," and "with individuals taking increasing responsibility for these" (Saich, 2001: 176). Importance as these bottom-up dynamics

are, students of Chinese politics still lack a framework to map whether and how these elementary forms of civic assets can develop and flourish. This case study has set out to explain this particularly process within the neighborhood space. With a theoretical device focusing community governance reform and social capital accumulation, we have demonstrated that state-fostered institutional reform can provide necessary conditions for local residents to engage in the neighborhood organization and interact with each other to solve indigenous problems. In particular, the deliberate construction of state-empowered participatory platforms, as can be found in the practice of deliberative assembly in Gumei community, provide important preconditions for horizontal interactions that facilitate the accumulation of social capital in urban China.

As indicated in the model self-governance program in Shanghai, neighborhood volunteerism, from the willingness to contact RC staff and initiatives to solve neighborhood problems and to the various sub-groups formation in deliberating the ways that neighborhood problems should be solved, are not developed out of the previous social interactions. Rather, this nascent form of civic life can be better explained by associating them to the politics of neighborhood governance reform, which is promoted by the overarching regime. This implies that we should pay sufficient attention to the overarching political mobilizing process in the making of social capital. State initiative matters largely because it opens the possibility and creates necessary incentives and resources for local residents to expand their civic life in authoritarian context.

Such a finding, although cannot be generated to other community settings because of scope of condition, it is arguably comparable in some cross-national observations. As Fung and Wright (2000)'s "Utopian Project" has shown, empowered state settings around such issues as community policing and school reform can effectively draw many participants who otherwise would have little community involvement. Baiocchi (2003) raises a similar theme in his study of Brazil's assembly of participatory budget, through which he finds that participants in these assemblies creates open-ended and public-minded discussions even in the power socioeconomic district settings.

To sum up, the scheme of urban community building may create a particular structure of social interactions for the engagement of residents in urban China. These overarching state-initiated networks which function as the "capital of social capital", provide resources and incentives for the residents especially those with less organizational power resources to interact and negotiate a meaning of community. Such a dynamics remains localized and even fragmented, it might in turn shape the governability of community in urban China.

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