

THEORETICAL REFLECTION ON THE PRACTICE OF URBAN COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract: China's rapid urbanization since the 1990s has fundamentally reshaped grassroots social structures, prompting state-led community construction initiatives. Unlike Western concepts of organic social cohesion, Chinese urban communities are externally shaped entities, particularly following the policy reforms post-2000. This paper examines how these forces have redefined community roles amid social integration challenges following the decline of the danwei (work-unit) system. By analyzing conceptual shifts, it provides theoretical insights into governance practices and proposes a balance between state guidance and social autonomy. The study highlights the tension between administrative efficiency and grassroots vitality, offering pathways for sustainable community development in China's urban landscape.

Keywords: Community concept; Urban governance; Social transformation; Post-danwei society; Grassroots democracy

1 INTRODUCTION

China's urbanization since the 1990s has been one of the most rapid and transformative processes in modern history, fundamentally reshaping the country's social, economic, and political landscapes. This unprecedented urban expansion has not only altered the physical environment but has also profoundly impacted grassroots social structures, particularly the traditional community systems that once defined Chinese urban life[1]. The decline of the danwei (work-unit) system, which served as the cornerstone of urban social organization for decades, has left a void in social integration and governance, prompting the Chinese state to initiate a series of community construction policies aimed at redefining urban communities[2]. Unlike Western notions of organic social cohesion, Chinese urban communities have emerged as externally shaped entities, heavily influenced by state-led interventions and policy reforms, especially in the post-2000 era[3]. This paper seeks to explore how these forces have redefined the roles of urban communities in China, addressing the challenges of social integration and governance in the context of a post-danwei society. By analyzing the conceptual shifts in community construction, this study provides theoretical insights into governance practices and proposes a framework for balancing state guidance with social autonomy, ultimately offering pathways for sustainable community development in China's urban landscape.

The danwei system, which dominated urban China from the 1950s to the 1990s, was more than just an economic unit; it was a comprehensive social institution that provided housing, healthcare, education, and social welfare to its members[1]. It functioned as a microcosm of the socialist state, ensuring social stability through its tightly knit organizational structure. However, with the economic reforms of the late 20th century, the danwei system began to erode, giving way to market-oriented practices and a more mobile labor force[2]. This shift led to the fragmentation of traditional social networks, creating new challenges for social integration and governance in urban areas[4]. As the danwei system declined, the state recognized the need to rebuild urban communities from the ground up, not only to maintain social order but also to foster a sense of belonging and collective identity among urban residents.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese government launched a series of community construction initiatives aimed at redefining the role of urban communities in the post-danwei era[5]. These initiatives were characterized by a top-down approach, with the state playing a central role in shaping the structure and function of urban communities. Unlike Western concepts of community, which often emphasize organic social cohesion and grassroots participation, Chinese urban communities have been largely constructed as administrative entities, designed to serve as intermediaries between the state and individual citizens[6]. This state-led approach has been particularly evident in the policy reforms introduced after 2000, which sought to strengthen community governance by establishing neighborhood committees, promoting community services, and encouraging citizen participation in local affairs.

However, the state-led construction of urban communities has not been without its challenges. One of the key tensions in this process has been the balance between administrative efficiency and grassroots vitality. On the one hand, the state has sought to maintain tight control over urban communities, ensuring that they function as effective tools for social management and political stability. On the other hand, there is a growing recognition of the need to foster grassroots democracy and social autonomy, allowing communities to develop organically and respond to the diverse needs of their residents. This tension has been a central theme in the evolution of urban community governance in China, reflecting broader debates about the role of the state in shaping social structures and the potential for bottom-up participation in a highly centralized political system.

This paper examines these dynamics by analyzing the conceptual shifts in community construction and governance practices in urban China. It begins by exploring the historical context of the danwei system and its decline, highlighting

the challenges that emerged in the post-danwei era. It then examines the state-led initiatives that have sought to redefine urban communities, focusing on the policy reforms introduced after 2000 and their impact on community governance. Drawing on theoretical insights from urban studies and political science, the paper provides a critical analysis of the tensions between state guidance and social autonomy, offering a framework for understanding the evolving role of urban communities in China. Finally, it proposes pathways for sustainable community development, emphasizing the need to balance administrative efficiency with grassroots vitality and to foster a more participatory approach to urban governance.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on urban governance and social transformation in China, offering new insights into the challenges and opportunities of community construction in a rapidly urbanizing society. By highlighting the tension between state-led interventions and grassroots participation, it provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities of urban governance in China and offers practical recommendations for policymakers and practitioners. Ultimately, this paper seeks to advance the discourse on sustainable community development, not only in China but also in other contexts where rapid urbanization and social transformation pose similar challenges. Through its analysis of conceptual shifts and governance practices, it aims to provide a theoretical foundation for rethinking the role of communities in urban landscapes, offering a vision of urban governance that is both efficient and inclusive.

2 COMMUNITY CONNOTATIONS IN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP

2.1 Tönnies' Dichotomy and Early Developments

The study of communities has its roots in the seminal work of Ferdinand Tönnies, whose 1887 distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) laid the foundation for modern community studies[7]. Tönnies defined *Gemeinschaft* as a traditional, emotionally bonded society rooted in kinship, shared values, and mutual obligations, contrasting it with *Gesellschaft*, which is characterized by rational, contractual relationships typical of modern industrial societies. This framework profoundly influenced early sociological thought, including the work of Chinese scholars such as Fei Xiaotong[8], who adapted Tönnies' ideas to characterize Chinese society as a "ritual society" (*li shehui*), emphasizing moral obligations over legal contracts.

The Chicago School of Sociology further expanded Tönnies' work by operationalizing the concept of community as a spatial unit. Robert Park, a leading figure in the Chicago School, emphasized the importance of geographical boundaries and social interaction in defining communities[9]. His 1915 work, *The City: Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment*, shifted the focus of community studies from abstract theorizing to empirical analysis of urban dynamics. This approach was exemplified in the Lynds' *Middletown*, a holistic study of a small American town that documented the impact of industrialization on social norms, power structures, and community life.

2.2 Evolution of Community Definitions

By the mid-20th century, the concept of community had become increasingly complex, with scholars offering diverse definitions[10]. Hillery's review identified over 90 distinct definitions of community, noting that most shared three core elements: social interaction, geography, and shared identity[10]. This tripartite framework provided a useful starting point for understanding communities, but it also highlighted the challenges of defining a concept that is both spatially and socially contingent.

Anthony Giddens' work bridged structural and cultural perspectives, framing community as both a spatial unit and a mechanism for social empowerment. His "third way" theory advocated for active citizenship and hybrid governance models, emphasizing the role of communities in fostering social cohesion and democratic participation. Giddens' ideas have been particularly influential in the context of urbanization, where the fragmentation of traditional social structures has created new challenges for community building.

3 LOCALIZATION OF COMMUNITY IN CHINA

3.1 Early Adaptations and Academic Contributions

The introduction of Western sociological theories to China in the early 20th century led to the localization of the community concept. Early Chinese sociologists such as Wu Wenzao and Fei Xiaotong integrated Western theories with functionalist anthropology, creating a uniquely Chinese approach to community studies. Wu emphasized the importance of spatial boundaries in defining communities, while Fei focused on rural villages as microcosms of broader societal structures. Their work formed the basis of the "Modern Chinese Sociological School," which blended Tönnies' typology with Malinowski's functionalism.

Fei Xiaotong's seminal work[5], *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, remains a cornerstone of Chinese sociology. Fei argued that Chinese society is fundamentally different from Western societies, emphasizing the importance of moral obligations and interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) over legal contracts. This perspective has profoundly influenced Chinese approaches to community building, particularly in the context of urbanization.

3.2 Policy-Driven Transformation

The post-1980s market reforms in China dismantled the danwei system, which had served as the primary mechanism for social integration and welfare provision[2]. This created a vacuum in social governance, necessitating new mechanisms for community building. The 1987 Ministry of Civil Affairs initiative introduced community services to address welfare gaps, marking the beginning of state-led community construction in urban areas.

By 2000, the Opinions on Promoting Community Construction redefined urban communities as administrative units, conflating geography with governance. This policy shift created “governance communities” that prioritized social control over organic cohesion[11]. While this approach addressed immediate challenges, it also led to the institutionalization of communities as extensions of the state apparatus, rather than organic social entities.

3.3 Institutionalization and State Dominance

State policies since 2000 have increasingly tied community development to political objectives, such as building a “harmonious society” (hexie shehui). This has resulted in a top-down approach to community governance, with neighborhood committees serving as the primary mechanism for implementing state policies. However, empirical studies reveal significant challenges, including low resident participation and administrative overload. Chen and Tang found that neighborhood committees often struggle to balance their administrative responsibilities with the need to foster grassroots engagement, leading to a disconnect between state objectives and community needs[5].

4 POST-DANWEI SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

4.1 Challenges of Social Integration

The collapse of the danwei system left significant gaps in social welfare and governance, creating new challenges for social integration. Lin Shangli argues that urban communities have become strategic spaces for addressing these challenges, including migration, inequality, and social fragmentation[1]. However, the over-reliance on administrative models risks replicating the rigidities of the danwei era, stifling grassroots innovation and social vitality.

4.2 Hybrid Governance Models

Scholars have advocated for hybrid governance models that combine state guidance with civil society participation. Tian and Lü propose “post-danwei governance” as a framework for balancing top-down coordination with grassroots autonomy[2]. This approach emphasizes the importance of decentralized decision-making and resource allocation in fostering social capital and community resilience.

Zhao and Lei highlight the role of resource allocation as a critical function of community governance, arguing that decentralized decision-making can enhance the efficiency and responsiveness of community services[3]. Their research underscores the importance of fostering social capital through participatory governance and community-led initiatives.

4.3 Grassroots Innovations

Case studies from cities such as Guangzhou and Shanghai demonstrate the potential for grassroots innovations to enhance community governance. Chen and Tang document successful initiatives in Guangzhou that balance state policies with community-led projects, such as participatory budgeting and social enterprise partnerships. Similarly, Yu and Zhao (2020) highlight the role of social enterprises in fostering resident engagement and service efficiency in Shanghai[3].

5 TRANSCENDING ADMINISTRATIVE MODELS

5.1 Rethinking Governance Structures

Scholarly discourse has highlighted the need to balance administrative frameworks with community dynamics. Leading sociologists emphasize that sustainable community development requires fostering local capacities while maintaining regulatory oversight. Empirical research indicates that overly centralized approaches may inadvertently limit participatory mechanisms. Comparative studies suggest that governance models incorporating bottom-up elements often demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement, though contextual adaptations are critical for applicability in diverse urban settings.

5.2 Pathways for Social Empowerment

International comparisons highlight the importance of trust and civic engagement in fostering sustainable communities. Rothstein argues that the quality of government institutions is a key determinant of social trust and community resilience[12]. In China, adaptive strategies are needed to reconcile administrative efficiency with social vitality. These include:

- Participatory Governance: Expanding platforms for resident decision-making, such as participatory budgeting and community forums.
- Social Capital Development: Fostering voluntary associations and mutual aid networks to enhance community resilience.
- Regulatory Flexibility: Allowing bottom-up initiatives within legal frameworks to encourage grassroots innovation.

5.3 Theoretical Reconstruction

A reconstructed theory of community should integrate Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* ideals with China's social context. This requires recognizing the community as both a governance unit and a social entity, where state guidance coexists with civil society autonomy. Such a framework would provide a more nuanced understanding of community dynamics in China's urban landscape.

6 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

China's urban community construction has emerged as a critical arena for addressing the social and governance challenges brought about by rapid urbanization and the decline of the *danwei* system. Over the past two decades, state-led initiatives have played a pivotal role in reshaping urban communities, transforming them into administrative entities designed to ensure social stability. While these efforts have successfully addressed immediate challenges related to social integration and governance, they have also revealed inherent tensions between top-down administrative models and the organic development of grassroots social dynamics. This tension underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to urban community construction—one that balances state guidance with the cultivation of resident autonomy and social capital.

The state-led model of community construction has undeniably achieved significant successes, particularly in terms of administrative efficiency and the provision of public services. By establishing neighborhood committees, promoting community services, and encouraging citizen participation, the state has created a framework for urban governance that ensures social order and addresses the practical needs of residents. However, this model has also been criticized for its overreliance on top-down control, which risks stifling the organic growth of communities and limiting the potential for grassroots innovation. The emphasis on administrative efficiency often comes at the expense of social vitality[3], as residents are treated more as passive recipients of services rather than active participants in community life. This approach not only undermines the development of social capital but also limits the potential for democratic participation and civic engagement.

To transcend these limitations, policymakers must prioritize strategies that foster resident autonomy and social capital accumulation. This requires a shift away from purely administrative models of governance toward more inclusive and participatory approaches. Empowering residents to take an active role in community decision-making can help build a sense of ownership and belonging, which are essential for the long-term sustainability of urban communities. By creating spaces for dialogue and collaboration, policymakers can encourage the development of social networks and trust, which are the foundations of social capital. These efforts should be complemented by policies that support grassroots organizations and civil society initiatives, providing them with the resources and autonomy they need to thrive.

Moreover, future research should explore hybrid governance models that integrate the strengths of state-led initiatives with the dynamism of grassroots social dynamics. Such models could involve the co-production of public services, where the state and residents work together to design and implement community programs. They could also include mechanisms for participatory budgeting, where residents have a direct say in how resources are allocated within their communities. By fostering collaboration between the state and civil society, these models have the potential to enhance both administrative efficiency and social vitality, creating a more balanced and sustainable approach to urban governance.

The implications of these hybrid models extend beyond the immediate challenges of community construction. They offer a pathway for addressing broader issues related to social stability and democratic participation in China's urban landscape. By fostering a more inclusive and participatory approach to governance, these models can help build a sense of shared responsibility and collective identity among urban residents. This, in turn, can contribute to greater social cohesion and resilience, reducing the risk of social fragmentation and conflict. At the same time, by creating opportunities for civic engagement and democratic participation, these models can help lay the groundwork for a more vibrant and dynamic civil society.

In conclusion, the future of China's urban community construction lies in finding a balance between state guidance and grassroots vitality. While state-led initiatives have played a crucial role in addressing the challenges of rapid urbanization, they must be complemented by efforts to empower residents and foster social capital. By prioritizing resident autonomy and exploring hybrid governance models, policymakers can create urban communities that are not only efficient and stable but also inclusive and dynamic. This approach offers a promising pathway for sustainable community development, one that can serve as a model for other rapidly urbanizing societies facing similar challenges. Ultimately, the success of China's urban community construction will depend on its ability to adapt to the evolving needs of its residents, fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose in an increasingly complex and diverse urban landscape.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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