

# Grassroots Governance in Urban China: Transition, Power Operation, and Findings from Beijing

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**Abstract:** This thesis reveals the process of the elimination of the *danwei* system and the establishment of the *shequ* system. How power operates in grassroots urban governance is asked in this thesis. By adopting a framework of power theory and data from the two-period fieldwork, this thesis has two findings. First, in terms of Chinese grassroots governance, power penetrates structurally and individually. The structural power is defined as the ability entitled by the political structure, which can make things happen, prevent something, or create a discourse. It is reflected by the practice of dual system and of deliberative democracy in *shequ*. As the extension of structural power, individual power brings both broader boundary of grassroots leader's behavior and more pressure. Second, power is reacted differently. The grassroots leaders in urban area react to superior power with more autonomy than the ones in the rural area. Activists in *shequ* react to power positively either for the mental legacy of the pre-reform era or for the sense of belonging. In contrast, the inactive majority prefers to keep a distance from the local authority.

**Keywords:** China; Power; *Shequ*; Grassroots Governance

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

“What is the grassroots governance in China” was the first question I asked myself after reading Tomba’s attractive work (2014). His arguments about the segregative function of gated communities, the ubiquitous control, and the influence of the CPC in local China inspired me. As an urban Chinese resident, I barely understood how I was governed, that urban transition was so intangible to me. However, when I realized the existence of ubiquitous grassroots governance around me after reading Tomba’s work before the summer of 2018, I decided to take the grassroots urban governance in China as my thesis topic immediately.

Therefore, I started to conduct my research plan in the summer of 2018. To approached to the local governors and the administrative system as close as I can, I joined a CSO, named EnPai (恩派), which was dedicated to the incubation of interest organizations such as dancing team or patrol team in *shequ* in Beijing. I worked as an assistant of a senior investigator for three months during which my duty was interviewing local governors, residents, and other participators within the daily political practice. Thanks to this experience, I made a steady connection with my research partners and respondents, from whom I was introduced to more respondents in my formal three-months fieldwork in the spring of 2019.

Overall, this thesis is based on two three-months participate observations in Beijing. During these two periods, seven local governors and twelve residents from five *shequ* were interviewed. Moreover, abundant notes have been collected as primary data. The five *shequ* in which interviews were conducted formally should be regarded as the fieldsites in this thesis. Information in detail is shown in Table 1.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Site</b>	<b>Respondents (Age)</b>	<b>ID</b>
2019.02.11	HJLB <i>Shequ</i>	Secretary Y	A1
2019.03.10	HJLB <i>Shequ</i>	2 Dancing Team Member (61)(65); 2 Residents (39)(50)	A2
2019.02.15	CYM <i>Shequ</i>	Secretary Z; 1 Resident (25)	B
2019.02.18	XX <i>Shequ</i>	Secretary Z; Director L; 2 Patrol Team Member (70)(71)	C
2019.02.21	DT <i>Shequ</i>	Secretary S; Director Z; 2 Patrol Team Members (61)(66); 2 Residents (41)(43)	D
2019.03.06	NZG <i>Shequ</i>	Secretary M; 1 Elder Care Team Member (59)	E

**Table 1. Information of Fieldsites**

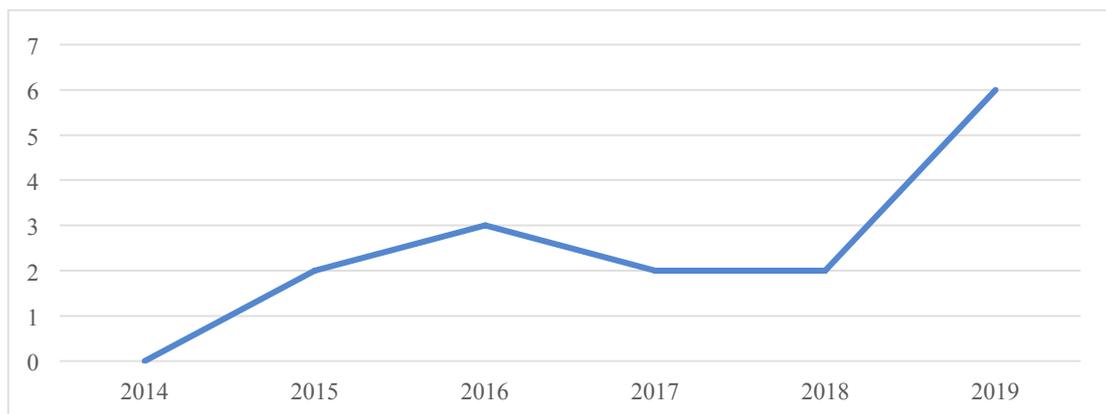
## 1.2 New Trend

Beijing's spring is an important window to observe China for scholars of various disciplines, as the “*Lianghui*” (两会, the Two Meetings) is normally held in March. “*Lianghui*”, an abbreviation of the National People's Congress (NPC, 全国人民代表大会) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中国人民政治协商会议), represents the highest arrangement of Chinese political agenda, at least in the sense of the central government. As one of the most crucial documents of NPC, the government work report (政府工作报告), which is regarded as a conclusion of

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the passing year and an expectation of the coming year, has been one of the significant lenses to understand Chinese politics and policies for a long time.

In this year's report, there is a new highlight that "community" (*shequ*, 社区)<sup>1</sup> has been mentioned more than ever (figure 1). In recent years, *shequ*, which represents a geographic territory in which people live, has become the basic unit of Chinese governance. Meanwhile, it has become the allocator of some parts of the social welfare after the urban transformation. As shown in figure 1, starting from 2014 to 2019<sup>2</sup>, the frequency of *shequ* being mentioned is similar every year. Suddenly this year, it became more important to the central government. Specifically, financial service, aging caring, childcare, health caring, culture development, administrative reform, and administrative hierarchy been mentioned (Li 2019).



**Figure 1. Frequency of "Shequ" Mentioned in Government Work Report Per Year**

Why does this happen in the report of 2019? First, the CPC's (Communist Party of China, 中国共产党) reiteration of the importance of the grassroots construction of the party (基层党建) highlights the character of *shequ*. As the basic unit of governance, the grassroots construction of the party is supposed to be rooted in *shequ*.

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<sup>1</sup> Translating *shequ* into community is problematic. As the key question of this thesis, the discussion of the concept of Chinese *shequ* will be presented in the latter sections.

<sup>2</sup> The reason of choosing 2014 as the beginner is it is the starting point of the present government. Because of the black-box status of China's politics, it is implausible to classify political period by ideology. So, I adept a temporal classification.

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Meanwhile, *shequ* is also where political control of the CPC ends. The debate over the recession, regain, and reinforcement of the grassroots control has been ongoing inside the party since the Reform and Open initiated, but it reached a new peak in 2018. As stated by Xi in a senior conference, *Shequ* is regarded as one of the basic units of grassroots governance by the CPC (Study China Wechat 2018). Second, in the sense of administrative reform, since the *danwei* system (单位体制), which was the former grassroots governing system in which urban people were organized intensively by their workplaces named *danwei*, shrinks in the individual domain in the 1990s, *shequ* has been a replacement of the implement of policies and social warfare. Thus, when the government facing new problems such as population aging, ideological fluctuation, or decline of birth rate, the central government expects that *shequ* can be the appropriate instrument.

### 1.3 Research Question

In this sense, *shequ* is an entry point to study urban governance in China. My experience of engaging in my participate observation has enhanced this thought. Before this experience, my understanding of the grassroots governance of urban China was normative that I thought the interaction between different entities was in accordance with the administrative hierarchy. However, the reality is the dual system consists of the party and the government complicated the political process surprisingly. Meanwhile, how power affects local officers and residents also refreshes my understanding. Thus, to understand the grassroots governance in urban China, this thesis takes the following question as the research question: how does power operate in grassroots urban governance?

To answer this question, this master's thesis will map the transition of grassroots governance of urban China, examine relative key works, and discuss my findings in Beijing. First, in this thesis, I would like to draw a detailed picture of the local

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governance in Beijing, China. In this picture, the evolution of present grassroots governance in urban China, the *shequ* system, will be illustrated in a temporal sequence. This illustration explains the social context of the *shequ system*. This social context influences residents' understanding of welfare, power, and their relations with the authority. Thus, it is important to explain it before the analysis of power. At the meantime, it needs more evidence to generalize what we will see in Beijing to the whole country; however, it is the standard model which is being popularized. Besides, a new round of state-oriented urbanization seems to be on its way, it is possible the popularization of the local governance in Beijing penetrates these growing cities. Thus, it is of vital importance to understand what is really happening in Beijing's urban area in order to understand country-wide trends in urbanization and urban governance. Second, the dual system of the government and the party would be highlighted in this thesis. To understand the character of the party is significant to China studies because the system of governing and the system of the party are interconnected. As we already have many studies built on a single perspective, this thesis focuses on the intersection of these two systems. Third, key power theories will be connected with Chinese practice. Foucauldian knowledge/power sheds light on the local practice of grassroots governance in urban China, that an ambivalent perspective of power and the function of discourse are worth more attention.

This thesis takes qualitative data as the main sources. As this thesis focuses on the operation of power in grassroots urban China, understanding is fundamental to this thesis. In this thesis, the understanding of urban transition is supported by official documents and key works on Chinese urbanization. Moreover, the understanding of power is underpinned by transcripts and notes conducted in my fieldwork. Though quantitative method becomes more prevalent in contemporary academia, it is too risky for this thesis to measure the grassroots governance in urban China quantitatively when a normative method is missing. Overall, official documents, key works on

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Chinese urbanization, transcripts of my interview, and notes collected in my participate observation are the data will be used in this thesis.

Except for the introductory, methodological and conclusive chapters, this thesis is divided into two parts. The first part includes chapter 3, which is more descriptive than analytic. This part's job is to provide the background knowledge as the foundation of further analysis. The second part includes chapter 4 and chapter 5. This part is a systematic research process in which theories and reality are combined together. Specifically, after this chapter, the others are organized as follows. In the next chapter, considerations which are essential to my research plan will be elaborated. Briefly, my practical need for flexibility and the belief of a researchable world lead to a research plan which consists of non-structured interviews and participates observations. Meanwhile, my realist preference contributes my concentration on observation of power. In Chapter 3, the history of grassroots governance will be illustrated with official documents and key works on Chinese urbanization. The social context of the grassroots systems in different periods will be explained in this chapter. Also, two further question will be asked at the end of this chapter as the starter of the analytic part. In chapter 4, a framework for identifying power will be provided. Identifying power in the present system of grassroots governance is a key procedure of its analysis. The Foucauldian knowledge/power, the heritage of the understanding of power in the pre-reform era, and a concept of power will compose the framework. In chapter 5, my observation of two kinds of power, named as structural power and individual power, and residents' reaction is combined with the framework provided in chapter 3 to generate arguments on how power runs in grassroots governance in urban China. In chapter 6, a conclusion will summarize the whole thesis, in which key arguments will be reiterated.

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## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

Chamber's statement of the "illusion of security" (Crawford *et al.* 2017, p. 32) inspired me before the research plan was finally made. It highlights the importance of acquiring knowledge as a source rather than following paradigm rigidly. Paradigm is necessary to generate assumptions in a standard way, but openness and flexibility make the lens larger and more knowledge accessible. The design of my research plan was based on practical considerations, so it does not always compromise the traditional paradigm.

#### 2.1.1 Ethical Considerations and Challenges

Because I engaged in the first part of my fieldwork before the establishment of my final research plan, I was aware of some challenges in practice and possible ethical considerations which would affect my interview and future writing. These factors are the agent-principal problem in my fieldwork and limitation of the interview. My research plan, which was formed by the period of my formal fieldwork, was based on the adjustments for these factors.

The formal fieldwork was planned to be conducted from January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019 to April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 in Beijing. During this period, I worked with EnPai for the second time. My duty was interviewing various groups of people in *shequ* and helping the incubation of residential organizations in *shequ*. Although working with this experienced organization made my participate observation feasible, it led to the classic agent-principal problem. The local authority prefers surveys to be undertaken in "model cities" (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006, p. 27). The selection of the topics lies in the fact of the party-state (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006, p. 25). Thus, I could not

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choose the target *shequ*, so that every *shequ* I visited was selected by the authority and EnPai. In the sense of this situation's possibility of influencing my reliability, I realized that it was important to keep a large extent of flexibility to gain as much information as possible, which could reflect various aspects of the daily practice of local government. Moreover, because the sensitivity of doing fieldwork was ambiguous, there would be unexpected challenges emerged. As stated in *Doing Fieldwork in China*, "the possibilities for doing fruitful fieldwork existed, but the many uncertainties made it so dangerous" (Heimer and Thøgersen 2006, p. 10). This danger affects both the secretaries and the residents since all of them are involved in the system. Specifically, participating in an interview with a student from a Western University may induce unnecessary investigation. To counter this risk, a serious process of anonymity should be applied.

Furthermore, the social hierarchy also influenced my interviews. Given the fact that the social hierarchy is from top to bottom and the social norm of respecting the elder, I stayed in a subordinate position. Thus, the secretaries and the residents tended to operate the interview that I was a listener frequently. In this sense, notes became important sources of my research.

### **2.1.2 Research Plan**

After mapping all these considerations, the final plan was settled down. I summed up two significant needs of my fieldwork. First was flexibility. Given the facts that I was engaging in participant observation of local governance in Beijing and my subordinate status in the interviews, I needed a very flexible research plan. Meanwhile, the unexpected issues may be valuable to me, which enhanced the need. The second one was reliability and validity. Though it is still under discussion between writers, different criteria for evaluating qualitative research still concern both reliability and validity (Bryman 2012, p. 389). I would collect as much information as

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possible and combine them with different types of sources. Therefore, unstructured interview, of which “the interviewer typically has only a list of topics or issues” (Bryman 2012, p. 213), was applied for its advantage of flexibility (Bryman 2012, p. 479). The questions were separated into two parts, but all of them had the same aim: to understand how power was delivered and consolidated. These questions are:

**Questions for Grassroots Governors:**

1. How should the Urban Resident Committee organize (Urban Residents Committee) the elders?
2. As a transfer of power, how should we evaluate the process of entitling the elders?
3. What is the character of *shequ*?

**Questions for Grassroots Residential Teams:**

1. Is the relation between you and the Urban Residents Committee from top to bottom?
2. How do you affect other residents?
3. What is the reason for your participation?
4. Is there any difficulty in your practice?

The questions for local governors focused on how they use their power. As the sender of power in *shequ*, these governors’ attitude towards power and their relationship with the residents should reveal the mode of power’s penetration. On the other hand, questions for grassroots residential teams concentrated on how they understand the governance around them, which should reflect on the process of the acceptance of power. Any unexpected topic might occur since the interview was non-structured. But it was exactly what I wanted to collect.

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### 3. History of Grassroots Governance in Urban China: A Literature Review

The present grassroots governance in urban China is built on the ruins of the *danwei* system (单位体制). *Danwei*, which was not only a workplace but also a welfare allocator and the most fundamental unit of the Socialist order, was in the center of ordinary Chinese life before the Reform and Open in 1979. However, it collapsed gradually when the urbanization boosted with a context of economic liberation. In today's China, *danwei* surveys linguistically which only refer to a workplace. On the contrary, *shequ* system, a new innovative system, becomes mainstream. Though *shequ* is the keyword in this thesis, a temporal analysis of the collapse of *danwei* system and the birth of *shequ* system is necessary because it provides the context to understand what *shequ* is, why it is promoted, and why various residents react to it differently.

In this sense, this chapter will start from a debate of two connected concepts, community, and *shequ*, to distinguish the indigenous characteristics which distinguish *shequ* itself from the English word “community”. After that, a present administrative structure of *shequ* will be displayed after a reframing of legal documents to explain the administrative and legal position of *shequ* in contemporary China. Next, the transition relates to the *danwei* system will be discussed, which is important to the understanding of grassroots governance in China. In the end, two further questions will be asked which will lead to a broader discussion.

#### 3.1 Community or *Shequ*?

The history of studying “community” is “uneven” (Crow 2014, p. 374). Traditionally, community refers to “a physical territory, or geographic area, where human beings reside and/or work” or “the quality or character of human relationships

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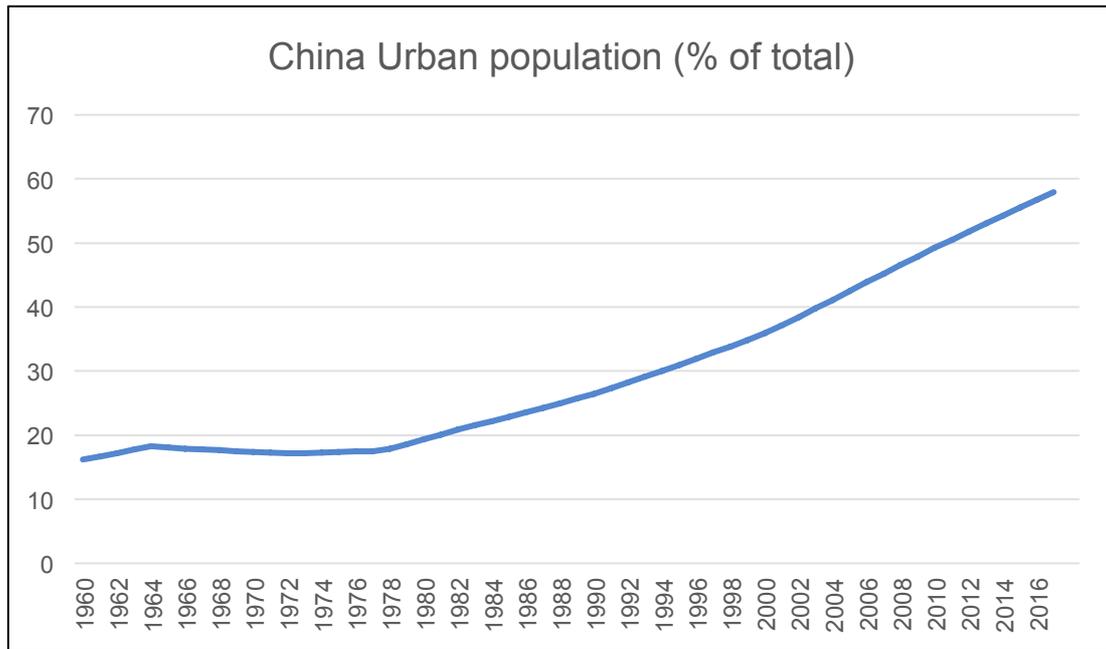
bind persons to each other to form a social group” (Halsall 2014, p. 2). This definition is also echoed in dictionary that community is “all the people who live in a particular area, country, etc. when considered as a group” or “a group of people who share the same religion, race, job, etc.” (Diana *et al.* 2014, p. 140). As scholars of various disciplines tend to create their own definition (Delanty 2013, p. 2), the evolution of “community” itself is still ongoing that the consensus on the definition has not formed. Nevertheless, these concepts reveal two shared characteristics of the “community” as a definition. First, the people who consist of a community share one or more common values or interests. These values or interests could be generated from any similarity such as job, territory, race, or religion. Second, geographic convergence of community could be a reason that people become a group.

These characteristics distinguish itself from *shequ* fundamentally. Though in the English version of government work report *shequ* is translated as “community”, in the Chinese context, *shequ* is an administrative unit on the local level and the basic ideological “battle fortress” of the CPC. The core of the *shequ* system is control. It does not represent an identity but as a consequence of administrative arrangement. How to control the enormous population efficiently is a key question to every Chinese authority. Before the boom of the urban population, most of the population of China was organized as villagers. Fei’s work (1980, p. 104-109) depicts the traditional village life under the control of the “imposed” Pao Chea (保甲制度) in the Kuomintang era. Pao Chea was designed to eliminate villager’s support for the communist authority by strict surveillance and punishment (Fei 1980, p. 105). China has been experiencing dramatic urbanization (figure 2) in the PRC time (Chen *et al.* 2013, p. 4), which changes the landscape and outlet of the urban and the rural fundamentally. This urbanization has moved a large amount of population from the rural to the urban which leads to a more complex mix of groups for the authority to control. In this process, some rural areas transformed into a part of cities; the others have engaged in rural urbanization more or less by means of population migration.

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*Shequ* started to be emphasized by the central government frequently after the millennium, as it was an efficient control method to be the substitution of *danwei*. Meanwhile, different areas in cities had been arranged to merge with each other to form new *shequ*. At this moment, “*shequ*” was departed from “community” thoroughly since it was a complete product of control. *Shequ* has been defined as “an entity consists of people who live within a certain geographical area” (Xinhua Agency 2000) in an official document. Though *shequ* as a concept is contending between legists and sociologists, the convergence is the geographical status. Thus, in the context of China, *shequ* refers to a group of people live in a certain geographical area defined by the authority.

Moreover, the composition of *shequ* contributes to the difference as well. As the *danwei* system barely influences cities, gated communities have replaced allocated dormitories in urban areas. In the period of the *danwei* system, housing was the major welfare of the state. However, commercial gated communities have become prior. Arguably, the liberation of the economy underpins this process (Staub and Yu 2014, p. 1). Some argue that *shequ* system excludes migrant workers from the urban administrative system, which leads to a vulnerable situation of them (Xu 2008, p. 4). However, for the owners of the gated communities, a strong sense of security has been acquired (Breitung 2012, p. 10). It is obvious that cognition of gated community varies across groups, nevertheless, the gated community has already been promoted significantly.



**Figure 2. China Urban Population (% of total)<sup>3</sup>**

## 3.2 Establishment of the *Shequ* System

### 3.2.1 Contemporary Administrative Hierarchy

Though the Urban Residents Committee have been established all around the country, the practice and the practical character of it are neither stationary nor clear. A secretary informed me that except the daily routine, their job also covered missions appointed by an upper authority<sup>4</sup>. It is notable that there is an upper authority of Urban Residents Committee. But As a self-governmental organization of the residents, the Urban Residents Committee should not have an upper authority. Yet, the *shequ* system represents the will of the central government. This should be noticed carefully when one studies the grassroots governance in China. Before we start to review the literature of the analysis of the dynamics of the transition, mapping the structure historically is necessary for the understanding.

<sup>3</sup> Source: World Bank.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2017&locations=CN&start=1960&view=chart>

<sup>4</sup> ID: A1.

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In the Chinese administration, the order of an upper authority is decisive to the lower government (Figure 3). There are four official urban administrative levels which respectively are the central government, the provincial government, the district government, and the subdistrict (*jiedao*, 街道, street level). However, according to the recent practice, *shequ* has become a subordinate unit of the subdistrict since a director of one *shequ* told me that “I need to report to the *jiedao*<sup>5</sup>” (“我要向街道汇报”). Each level has different responsibilities, that an upper level is likely to direct its subordinate while the subordinate practice the direction of its upper authority. For example, in a document sent out by the top authorities, either of the government system or of the party system, it always begins with “the decision has been made” and end with “every subordinate should design the practice”. It is also needed to notice that according to the Constitution of CPC, on every administrative level, there should be a party branch of the CPC. Thus, the hierarchy of the CPC is also a top-down hierarchy similar to what we can see in figure 3. The combination of the party and the government has formed a dual system in practice, which influences every corner of Chinese politics.

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<sup>5</sup> *Jiedao*, the street level, is the detached agency of the district government.

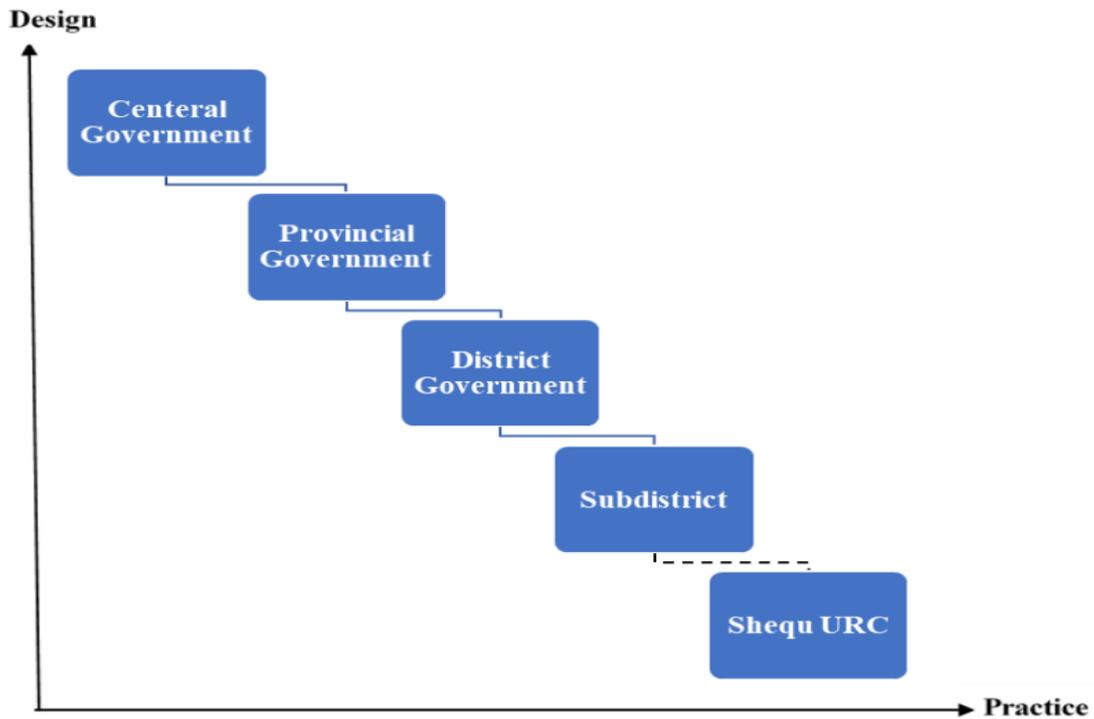


Figure 3. Structure and Allocation of Administrative System

### 3.2.2 Chronological Path of the Establishment of *Shequ* System

By following the historical path, the transition of grassroots governance can be understood in the context of the transform of the Chinese society (Figure 4). As a supplement of the *danwei* system for the people excluded from the *danwei* system (Xu 2000, p. 2), the Urban Residents Committee was established in 1954 by the Regulation of the Urban Residents Committee of the People’s Republic of China (Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress 1954). In this period, most urban residents were registered as members of their *danwei*. *Danwei* was responsible for its residents’ housing allocation, health care, and education, while the Urban Residents Committee provided all the non-member residents in the same area with relative less welfare.

When one studies the grassroots governance of China, *danwei* is an inevitable topic. *Danwei* was the major institution related to grassroots governance for several decades (figure 4). Though the *danwei* system has met its collapse, its heritage

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endures even in contemporary China, which is also influencing people's perception of *shequ* and the practice of *shequ*. As quoted above, *danwei*'s character was changed when the situation was different. So, what is a *danwei*?

*Danwei*, in Chinese means workplace literally. Even in contemporary China, people call a workplace as *danwei* frequently. Bray (2005, p.3) also notices this appearance that the image of *danwei* is still alive. However, the existence is more like a linguistic legacy that the essence of *danwei* has already ruined. Before the complete establishment of the *shequ* system, *danwei* was where the socio-spatial units in which the livelihood and domestic and social activities of its members were carried out (Bjorklund 1986, p. 1). Meanwhile, it allocated welfare, such as housing, medical care, and education to its member (Xu 2000, p. 2). Nevertheless, because the planned economy was replaced by a market-oriented economy, *danwei*'s strong enclosure failed to fit the new society (Chen 2001, p. 2). The direct outcome of the collapse of the *danwei* system was several rounds of massive lay-off. Though the lay-off was state-oriented, given the situation welfare was still handled by *danwei* but a non-state entity, institutional barrier hindered the "mobility of laid-off workers" from their *danwei* to the non-state sectors (Gu 1999, p. 261). This situation caused resentment at the authority; meanwhile, it accelerated the promotion of *shequ* as the allocator of welfare. As Bray argues:

*"Initially the danwei was an answer to a range of organizational and practical problems faced by the CCP-led government in the 1940s and 1950s and became one means through which a form of socialist governance could be deployed among the urban population. Later the danwei itself became part of the problem, influencing the parameters and possibilities for governmental intervention."* (Bray 2005, p. 2)

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The dominance of the *danwei* system and the Regulation of the Urban Residents Committee of the People's Republic of China had been kept as the direction of the practice of *shequ* until 1989. The inefficiency of the status quo called for a change. In 1989, the Organic Law of the Urban Residents Committee of the People's Republic of China was formulated (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 1989). At this monument, the definition of *shequ* had not been promoted as today, that Urban Residents Committee was seldom called "*shequ* Urban Residents Committee" but "Urban Residents Committee". Urban Residents Committee, according to the law, should be an autonomous organization of the residents, who should take "advice" from the subdistrict and help each other. Technically, this definition should have perpetuated the autonomy of the Urban Residents Committee.

However, the transition did not stop its step. Building on the experience of several dozens of experimental points<sup>6</sup> of *shequ* system reform in the whole country, the Central Committee of the CPC approved *Opinions on Promoting Establishment of Shequ* (Xinhua Agency 2000) in 1999 when could be regarded as the official beginning of the *shequ* system. In this statement, several advantages of the *shequ* system were clarified. First, *shequ* system, which should adopt resources from the market, could remedy the chaos of the welfare system which was caused by the gradual collapse of the *danwei* system. Practically, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee supports residential organizations financially or by providing useful items such as space. Also, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee provides a platform for both service company and residents. Second, it could create cohesion. Third, it could enforce the local control of the state and the CPC. Since then, the *shequ* system has become the most basic unit of grassroots governance in urban China. Thus, the promotion of *shequ* system has become a complex project involving different departments, ministries, and commissions. In 2016, a five years plan of the *shequ* system was

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<sup>6</sup> Experimental point is used for test if a new policy suits China. Before a contending policy being promoted to the whole state, one or several areas would be chosen to test the policy. This method is becoming common in China arguably (Heilmann 2008).

claimed which showed massive cooperation of the ministries of the national level (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016). By contrast, a plan of the *shequ* system was usually handled by the Ministry of Civil Affairs formerly. In 2010, a new trend of the *shequ* system was explored in the *Opinions on Improving Urban Residents Committee* (General Office of the Communist Party of China and General Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2010) that “insisting the leadership of CPC” became prior. This trend was enhanced by the *Work Regulation on Party Branch* (Xinhua Agency 2018) published in 2018, in which elaboration of insisting the leadership of the CPC was provided. So far, the *shequ* system has experienced a dramatic but continuous transition. Hopefully, a general picture of this system has been portrayed in this section.

In summary, the establishment of the *shequ* system is the history of the state-oriented elimination of the combination of *Danwei* and Urban Residents Committee. Though the difference of *shequ* Urban Residents Committee and Urban Residents Committee seems to be only on the linguistic level, they are fundamentally different. As shown in Table 2, Urban Residents Committee and *danwei* share the same Socialist context. *Shequ* Urban Residents Committee is accordant with the market economy background.

	<b>Period</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Economic Context</b>	<b>Relation with Third-Party Service</b>
<b>Danwei</b>	<b>1949-1990s</b>	<b>Major Welfare Allocator</b>	<b>Engage in Most Individual Domain</b>	<b>Planned Economy-Market Economy</b>	<b>No Third-Party Service Exists</b>
<b>Urban</b>	<b>1954-198</b>	<b>Organizati</b>	<b>Political</b>	<b>Planned</b>	<b>No</b>

<b>Residents Committee</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>on of marginal residents</b>	<b>Propaganda, Mobility Control</b>	<b>Economy-Market Economy</b>	<b>Third-Party Service Exists</b>
<b>Shequ Urban Residents Committee</b>	<b>1989-now</b>	<b>Only Welfare Allocator</b>	<b>Political Propaganda, Security, Mobilization, Harmony Maintaining</b>	<b>Market Economy</b>	<b>Promoting</b>

**Table 2. Comparison Between *Danwei*, Urban Residents Committee, and *Shequ* Urban Residents Committee**

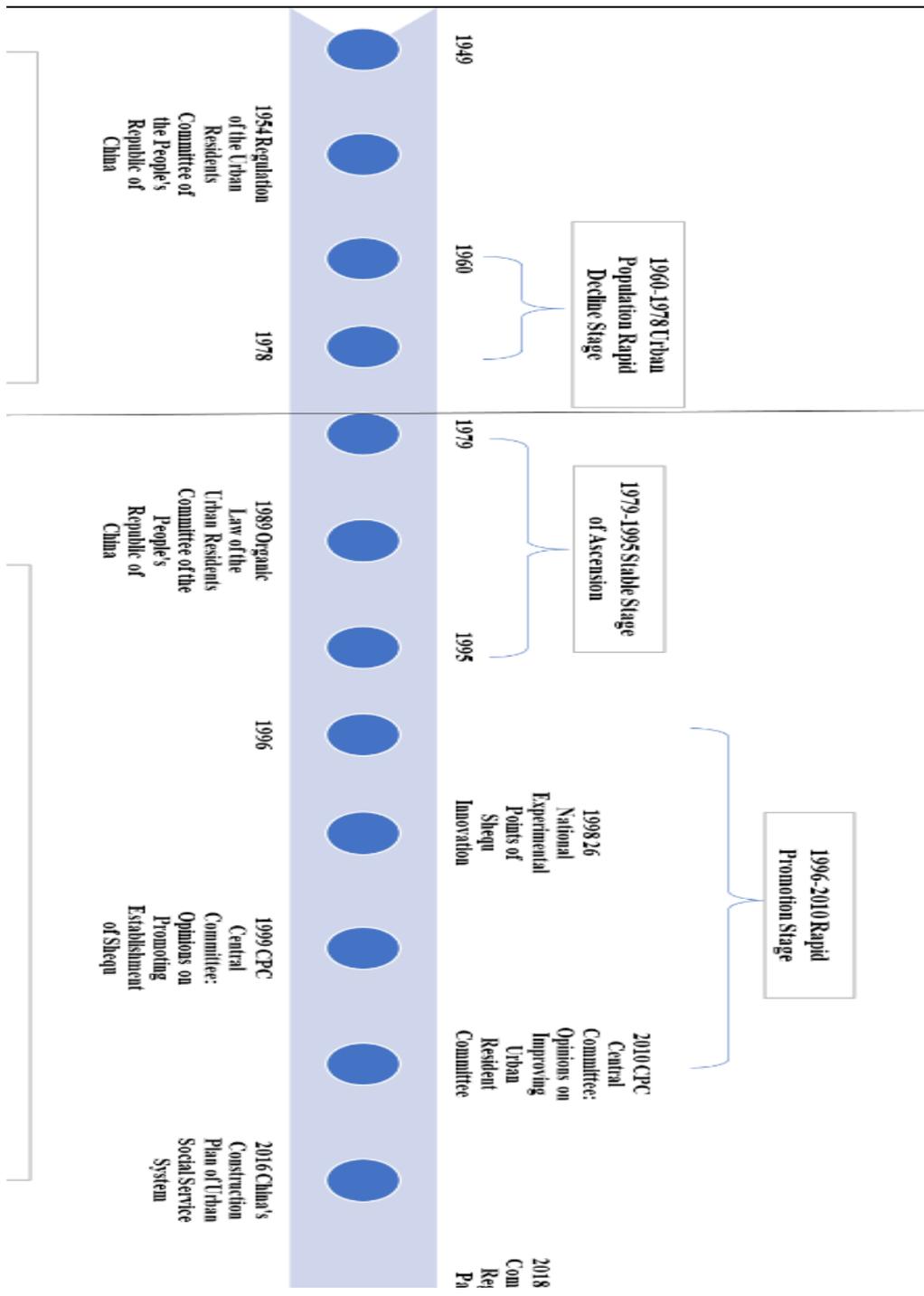


Figure 4. The Transition of Grassroots Governance in China

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### 3.3 Urban Transition: The Background

The urban transition can be a suitable term to summarize what happened after the Reform and Open in 1979. As mentioned above, grassroots governance is a part of the urban transition. Still, there are several other aspects needed to explain to provide the readers with enough background knowledge to understand the system as a whole.

An aspect of the urban transition is urbanization. As mentioned before, some classify three stages, which are the decline stage (1960-1978), the stable stage of ascension (1979-1995), and the rapid promotion stage (1996-2010), of Chinese urbanization by applying a quantitative analysis (Chen *et al.* 2013, p. 27, also figure 4). The speed of the urbanization after 1995 is impressive, however, some claim that China is suffering a “great leap forward” in urbanization, which leads serious cultural and environmental damage (Cao *et al.* 2014, p. 3). The urbanization shows strongly state-led trait by the controversial re-settlement organized in rural and construction area. Ong claims that though re-located villagers’ income reduces while expenditures rise after the resettlement (2014, p. 169). This paper also highlights the awkward dilemma of some new city residents that they are neither included in rural welfare system nor the urban one (Ong 2012, p. 163). The same situation also applies to migrant workers, though state-led resettlement does not happen to each of them. Migrant workers as an adequate resource have boosted China’s economic growth dramatically (Cai 2010, p. 2), they are treated differently in cities because of the *hukou* system. The link with the education of offspring and individual welfare makes the urban *hukou* desirable (Santos and Harrell 2017, p. 172). It also depicts the rareness of an urban *hukou*, especially of a high-income city. In the process of urbanization, the geographical distinction of *hukou* also affects people’s attitude towards pollution. Arguably, migrant workers may suffer from the pollution more than others (Schoolman and Ma 2012, p. 170), meanwhile, some of them believe that

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pollution is inevitable because of their stakes, interest, and the structural risk of protestation (Lora-Wainwright *et al.* 2012, p. 110).

The transform of land and poverty also molds the outline of Chinese urbanization and grassroots governance. In the urban area, despite land belongs to the state, the right of using land was controlled by *danwei* in the pre-reform era. Though the *danwei* system collapses, its control of the state-owned land usage makes it a major state player in the competition of state land (Hsing 2006, p. 3). *Danwei* as a state-owned land controller was defeated by municipal leaders in the competition of territory control (Hsing 2006, p. 4) which underpins the present situation that local officers control the land use in their territory. This is reflected in the latter analysis of my interview of the secretaries. Moreover, since the administrative allocation of land to different users (Ho and Lin 2003, p. 1), grassroots leaders are engaged in the commercial organization around their territory. The power hierarchy in land use transfer and its connection with conflict has been highlighted (Po 2011, p. 511). According to my interview, this enlarges grassroots leaders' invisible power which makes their behavioral boundary more ambiguous. This would also be analyzed in the last chapter.

Except for the contextual transform, several traits of grassroots governance itself have been discussed by scholars. A new framework of grassroots governance has been noticed. The governance framework is described as cooperation among administrative leaders, active residents, and civil society organizations (CSO) (Wang 2019, p. 3). In this framework, the administrative network works as the major director of daily practice with the help of active residents. Meanwhile, CSOs provides services such as media and commercial care, however, these CSOs effectiveness is limited by an immature market or unprofessional organization (Wang 2019, p. 3). Some arguments echo the findings of this framework. Lin has explored rapid growth commercial service for the elder in Guangzhou, however, the industry is still native (2017, p. 11). Nevertheless, some argue that CSOs are engaging with Chinese

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officials to promote cooperation (Fulda et al. 2012, p. 9). Given the surveillance of CSOs, their evidence proofs communication may be effective to create a survival space. Schlæger and Jiang highlight the function of media, specifically Weibo (微博), in local governance. They find that media, as quoted, has been used as “a battering ram to spearhead reforms”, “a virus bringing unexpected consequences”, and “a reinforcer of authorities’ existing power” (Schlæger and Jiang 2014, pp. 197–204). In terms of the daily practice of grassroots governance in China, deliberative democracy is claimed as a new trend by He (2018). In this article, He argues deliberative democracy changes his respondents’ perception of “equality, rights and obligations” (2018, p. 16). Although this deliberative democracy still suffers from surveillance or political hierarchy, it inspires researchers to rethink Chinese polity or authoritarianism as a concept. Power and its transition will be the keywords of this thesis. At the meantime, some scholars also yield relative findings that local authority in China is more powerful than its Western counterpart; meanwhile, as quoted, “is diplomatic in their negotiation and shows commitment to supporting the private sector” (Hin and Xin 2011, p. 1).

### 3.4 Left Questions

The body of literature on the establishment *shequ* system and the urban transition has portrayed the picture of grassroots governance in China. In this picture, the *shequ* system has been promoted as the substitution of the inefficient *danwei* system to maintain the CPC’s control over grassroots China in the context of economic liberation and rapid urbanization. In terms of the administrative hierarchy, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee is becoming a subordinate agency of the subdistrict government. Arguably, the building of local governance in China is a transformation of power (Wan 2016, p. 11). However, the detailed picture of the daily practice in *shequ* is still missing. In this sense, the research question, which asks how power

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operates in grassroots urban governance, is only partially answered. To answer the question, we need to look closer to the political interaction inside the *shequ*.

Then, where should we start? Since most of the residents do not have a feeling of shared identity, neither are they attached to the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee as how people were attached to *danwei*, how does the *shequ* system control the local? Therefore, to understand how power penetrates personal life in contemporary time becomes important. Moreover, power should not be viewed as simple as a force. For example, support of political agenda promoted by the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee is prevalent in some of my visited *shequ*, while others can keep a distance to ignore the agenda. Thus, as the other side of power's penetration, the acceptance of power is also needed to be explored.

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## 4. A Framework For Identifying Power

If we want to understand how power penetrates and be reacted in terms of the grassroots governance in urban China, we need to know what power is and how power effects. This chapter's job is to provide a fixed definition of power and relative thoughts which can help us understand it better.

In social science, power is an eternal topic. The interest in studying power is transnationally continuous. However, this keen interest also brings confusion. As described by Foucault, concepts, such as power or dominance, "have been ill defined, so that one hardly knows what one is talking about" (2000, vol. 1: Ethics, p.299). Foucault is maybe the most discussed philosopher of power theory when people concern power; however, in this chapter, he is not the only philosopher worth a review. Theories of Marx and Mao, whose thoughts affect China fundamentally, are still influencing our thinking so that their works are also worth reading. Foucault's theory will be the starter of this chapter, but we will end with Tang's theory, in which he attempts to unify power theories coherently. All these of these will form a framework for us to identify what the power is in grassroots governance in urban Beijing and to answer how power penetrates and the residents' acceptance of power.

### 4.1 Foucault's Power Theory

Not every philosopher's volume, comment, interview, or article could spread as broadly as Foucault's does. Foucault's attitude towards power is enlightening given the polity of China.

*"We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it*

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*produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.*” (Foucault 1979, p. 194)

This statement is so classic that it has been cited by many writers. It extracts the usually misunderstood characteristic of power very understandable that it is ambivalent. In the understanding of Foucault, “there are three levels” to his “analysis of power: strategic relations, techniques of government, and state of domination”, techniques of government establish and maintains domination (Foucault 2000, vols 1: *Ethnic*, p299). Power should not be studied in a moral attitude, however, in terms of studies of China, the polarization of power is common. For example, an individual’s power has been exaggerated in Brown’s analysis that Xi’s personal power is considered as the only variable in Chinese politics (2017). Indeed, Xi as the top leader of China is very important either to the state or to scholars; nevertheless, his power is built on, in Foucault’s language, techniques. When personal power becomes the only concern, important parts such as bureaucracy, acceptance, and output of discourse, or interest group will be ignored. Except for its philosophical contribution, Foucauldian form of power highlights the need for a retrospect of the lens we use.

*“No body of knowledge can be formed without a system of communications, records, accumulation and displacement which is in itself a form of power and which is linked, in its existence and functioning, to the other forms of power. Conversely, no power can be exercised without the extraction, appropriation, distribution or retention of knowledge. On this level, there is not knowledge on one side and society on the other, or science and the state, but only the fundamental forms of knowledge/power.”* (Gaventa 2003, p. 4)

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Moreover, Foucault's power/knowledge is fundamental to this thesis since it sheds light on how discourse influences people's acceptance of power. Residents in a *shequ* are not static; on the contrary, they are very active that the patterns of resistance can be found everywhere in Chinese society (Perry and Selden 2010, p. 31). In the last chapter, power/knowledge is useful to understand the acceptance of power in *shequ*.

## 4.2 Power Theory in Pre-Reform Period

*"They must understand that the road to the abolition of classes, to the abolition of state power and to the abolition of parties is the road all mankind must take; it is only a question of time and conditions... .. state power and political parties will die out very naturally and mankind will enter the realm of Great Harmony."* (Mao 1949, p. 1)

The history of PRC is divided into two parts if we use an economic classification: 1949-1978, and 1979-present. Because of the Reform and Open in 1979, the former period is called the pre-reform period. As we have already reviewed in chapter two, grassroots governance was also different. However, as we will see in the next chapter, its mental heritage still exists. Thus, we need to review the thoughts which were prevalent in that period to understand the behavior in today's China.

In the pre-reform period, Mao's thoughts were dominant. Though arguably in Marxism power means economic power (Wu 2015, p. 1) and power theory is incoherent with Marxism (Nigam 1996, p. 19), in *On The People's Democratic Dictatorship* (1949), one of the most famous works in Mao's early time, power is discussed implicitly. In this work, power is always with the state, which is called as "state power". As a Marxist, at least in 1949, Mao believes the state will be "eliminated" by the proletariat one day because the state is the instrument by which the bourgeoisie controls the proletariat; state power will also extinct one day. In Mao's theory, the elimination of the state will benefit all human being. Mao's power

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only means collective behavior conducted by a group of people (class) tacitly; however, more importantly, the emphasis of fighting for the happiness of all people has influenced many generations. This underpins many behaviors in *shequ*.

### 4.3 A Unifying Analytical Framework

There is a large body of power theory which could be relative to Chinese status, however, to discuss everything exceeds this thesis's scope. As an analysis of grassroots governance in China, this thesis would like to find the most appreciate framework as a tool. So far, we have two parts of it, Foucauldian knowledge/power and Mao's struggling spirit, however, we still need a clear definition of power to explore the relations in *shequ* and a bridge to connect all these parts together.

Tang has attempted to build a unifying analyzing framework of power theory by unfolding all fundamental paradigms of political science<sup>7</sup> (Tang 2011). By revisiting all these paradigms and their renowned representatives, Tang provides a definition of power as following, which will be used in the last chapter:

*“power is defined as ‘the capacity or ability possessed by an entity---which can be an agent (i.e., an individual or a collective of individuals), an organization (as a formal association of individuals), or an institutional arrangement or system (which inevitably requires the backing by agents or organizations)---to make something happen or prevent something from happening in a given social context, with or without the entity’s conscious behavior being involved.’”* (Tang 2013, p. 17)

### 4.4 Summary

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<sup>7</sup> These paradigms are Materialism, Ideationalism, Individualism, Collectivism, Biological Evolution-Determinism, Socialization, Anti-Socialization, Conflict Paradigm, Harmony Paradigm, Social System Paradigm, and Social Evolution Paradigm.

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Three essential aspects of power theories for Chinese studies have been highlighted in this chapter. First is the Foucauldian analysis of the agent of power. Given the liquidity of modern society (Lyon 2010, p. 3), power is not always delivered by a fixed agent. Foucault's "knowledge/power" is a useful tool for understanding how power is accepted by non-active residents in *shequ*. Second, the pre-reform power theory's influence is still existing in a specific group of people. When we focus on present discourses, the collective behavior of the elder group is hard to explain since the heritage of the pre-reform era motivates them. Thus, such a theory is a lens to understand them. Third, Tang's framework provides us a fixed definition of power. Though it will not stop the discussion of power itself, it empowers us to identify power and its transformation in the daily practice of grassroots governance in Beijing.

Though these contents cannot reflect the whole picture of power theories, they are useful for the analysis of the empirical material in this thesis. These contents have answered what power is, how it affects people and the specific mental legacy which still affects people. These are necessary to understand grassroots governance in urban China.

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## 5. Findings from Beijing

After spending 6 months<sup>8</sup> on participant observation and interviewing, I have collected many transcripts and notes of the grassroots governance in Beijing. These materials will be analyzed in this chapter by applying the framework and understanding of power theory to echo the findings of other scholars and to answer the left questions.

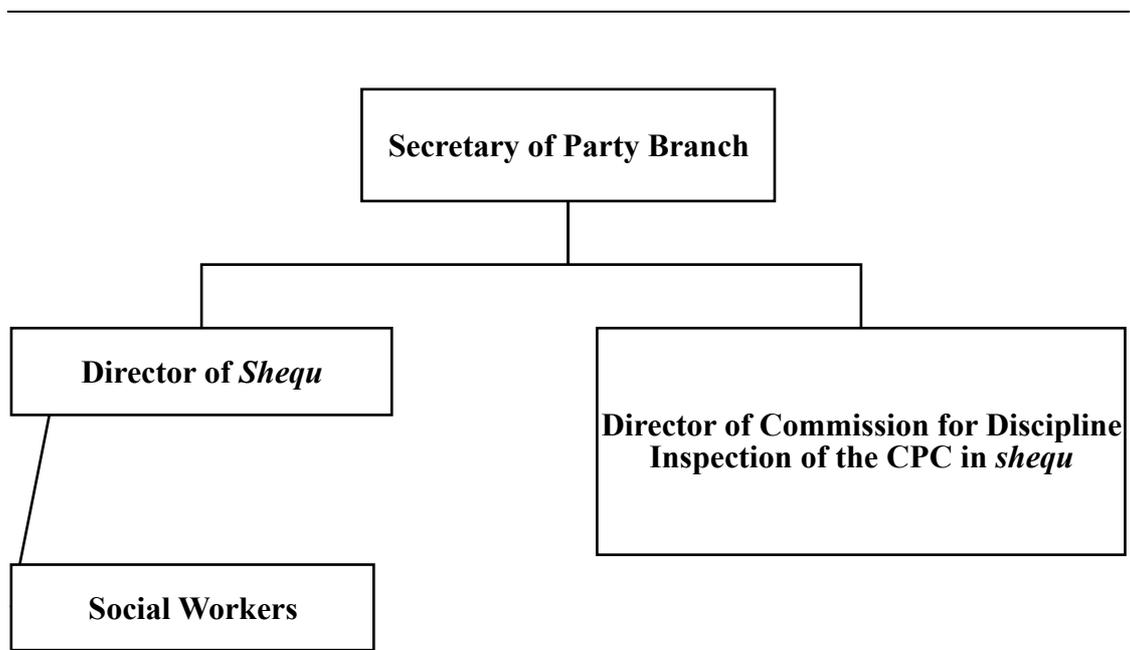
### 5.1 Power's Penetration

By applying Tang's definition of power and Foucauldian knowledge/power, powers' penetrations in *shequ* are inducted as structural power and individual power in this chapter. Structural power means the ability effects in the way as designed administratively to make things happen, to prevent something, or to create a discourse. In such a way, power is visible and can be followed. On the other hand, individual power is the power entitled to different agents because of a lack of sufficient accountability or the heritage of former practice. Individual power is harder to detect; however, it still obeys the definition of Tang's. As soon as we collect enough information, individual power can be identified from behavior or discourse.

#### 5.1.1 Structural Power

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<sup>8</sup> Two periods: June-August 2018; February-April 2019.



**Figure 5. Dual System in Shequ**

Structural power in *shequ* relies on the administrative hierarchy (Figure 5). The dual system underpins the structural power in *shequ*. On the one hand, there is a director of *shequ* Urban Residents Committee (社区居委会主任). This position represents the daily practice of *shequ* normally, which includes maintaining of the *hukou* system, operation of projects (which means the items relate to money), representing *shequ* in negotiation, and so on. On the other hand, there is a secretary of the party branch in *shequ*. Such a secretary handles everything relates to “harmony” (和谐) and the party. An example for the former one is the first person occurs in one’s mind when two inner *danwei* (内部单位, means a workplace located in a *shequ*) disagree with each other on any stuff in *shequ* is the secretary of the party branch. An example for the latter one could be the “studying for a stronger state” campaign ( “学习强国” 运动). This campaign is called by the central committee of the CPC in which every party member should keep studying every latest idea of the party leaders. This campaign is promoted digitally that every registered party member should download the application on their smartphones. In this campaign, party secretaries are the supervisor of the campaign in his or her *shequ*. A case of this campaign will be described latter in more details.

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It is common that several buildings in a *shequ* are assigned to *shequ* Urban Residents Committee and its party branch as a shared office. In picture 1, we can see that four different departments, which are *shequ* Urban Residents Committee (left one), Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC in *shequ* (CDI, left two), party branch in *shequ* (left three), and a police officer (left four), are located in the same building<sup>9</sup>. There is two points worth remark. The first one, which represents the specialty of the dual system of Chinese politics, the secretary of the party branch in *shequ* and the director of the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee could be the same person. Much of this is caused by a preference of grabbing power steadily of the CPC. This preference also creates a trait standard that the secretary of the party is more powerful than the administrative leader. As an informant<sup>10</sup> told me that:

*“Don’t waste your time on the director, go to the secretary!”*  
*(“找主任没用，找书记!”)*

This preference also changes the way one pursues a promotion. Except for the trust, promoting a party member for his or her contribution can enhance the image of the CPC in return. Thus, the competition of a vacancy in the party system in *shequ* is obviously fierce.

Another outcome of the dual system is that it entitles massive power and incredible burden on one person. In my participate observation, a secretary/director described her day as following<sup>11</sup>:

*“You know this is time for the ‘two meetings’. In several days I barely slept! In the daytime, I have to participate in the ‘street control’. Then I need to go back to the office to sign the paper for pipe reform. Several left-behind elders have been ill. I also need to manage to take care of them!”*

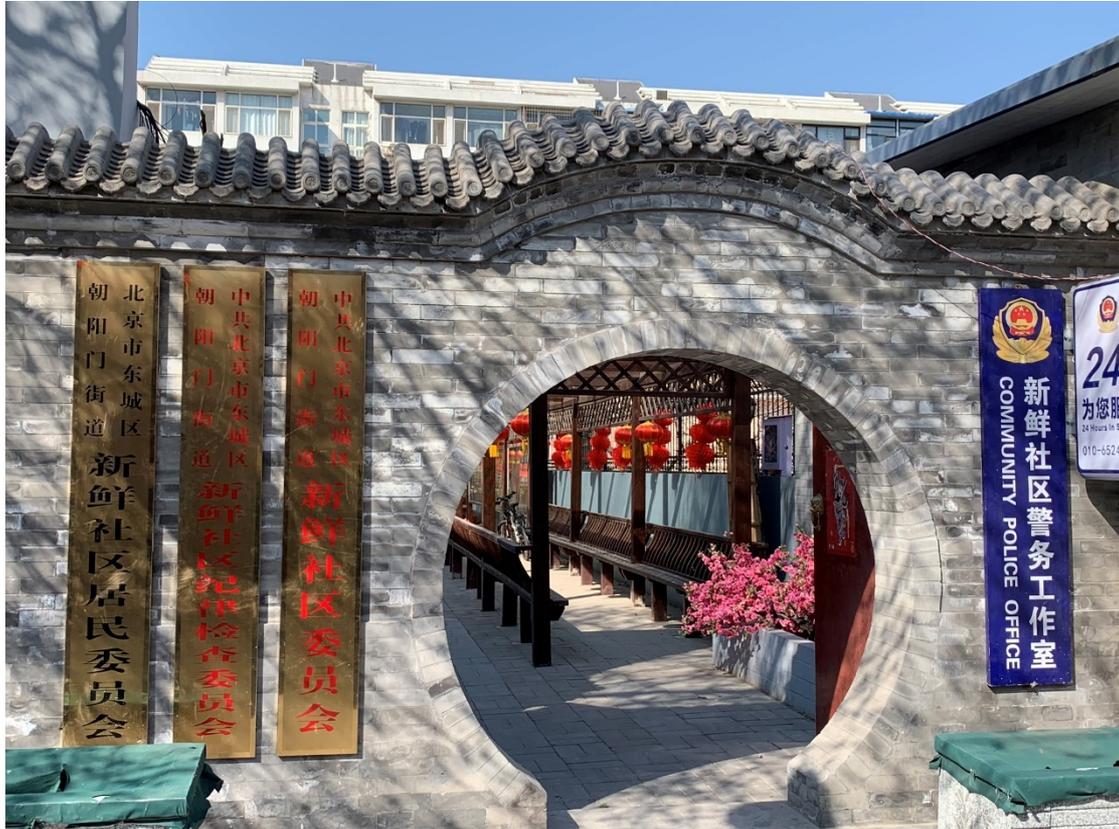
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<sup>9</sup> There is a technique to distinguish which system of one workplace belongs to in China. If the sign is black as one of *shequ* Urban Residents Committee, it belongs to the state or administration (“政口”); if the sign is red, it belongs to the party system (“党口”).

<sup>10</sup> ID: D, with Director Z.

<sup>11</sup> ID: A1.

“这不两会么，我这几天就没怎么睡觉！白天得去“街面控制”，然后还得回办公室签管网改造的字。正好儿还有几个空巢老人病了，还得想办法照顾一下！”



Picture 1. An office in a *Shequ* in Beijing

Being a welfare allocator also contributes to the penetrate of structural power. As explained in chapter two, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee manages the grassroots welfare contemporarily. Through the allocation of welfare, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee links itself with people’s life closely; meanwhile, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee enhances a positive acknowledgment of residents towards it. One case of this is elder caring. As listed in the NWR of 2018, caring for the old and the young is one of the most concerned problems. This was reflected in all the *shequ* I have investigated. The conflict between aging and one child, a large amount of whom are

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working in a distance to their parents, leads to a considerable number of the left-behind elder in Beijing. A daughter of a left-behind elder told me that<sup>12</sup>:

*“The Urban Residents Committee is taking care of my mother. They would call me if there is any news. This makes me relaxed a lot.”*

“居委会现在照顾我妈，有啥事他们都会给我打电话。这让我轻松多了。”

If we look closer to the process of how *shequ* deals with elder caring, we can find more information which sheds light on several aspects of the grassroots governance in *shequ*. One director informed me about her work on elder caring as following<sup>13</sup>:

*“We are trying to solve this issue by setting up “caring team”, uniting the elder, purchasing home care service by using the ‘CPC special fund for servicing the mass’, providing the elder with food, working with CSO and their volunteers, editing health care brochure, and calling the help of all party members. But it’s hard to really solve the problem because of a lack of capability. So shequ URC needs to find resources to remedy this problem. All we can do is finding resources to solve the known issues to evaluate the sense of happiness and the sense of gaining as secretary Xi says. This is to say as a platform, shequ URC can connect resources with the mass to make a sense of belonging to remedy the anxiety.”*

“我们社区通过组建安心团队、老年人抱团看病、使用党组织服务群众经费聘请“医陪诊”与家庭护理、提供老年餐、联络如“国安社区”的社会组织与志愿者、撰写健康手册、发挥党员带头作用等方式努力改善这一问题，但是由于力量有限，社区很难真正解决这一问题。所以社区一定要链接资源，才能最大限度的缓解问题。我们能做到的就是寻找问题、破题、链接资源、提供平台，提高习总书记所说的人民的“获得感”、“幸福感”。这也就是说，社区作为平台可以联系不同的组织提供全方位的养老服务，加强群众间联系，使群众对社区有一种归属感，由此最大限度地渐少群众的焦虑。”

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<sup>12</sup> ID: A2.

<sup>13</sup> ID: B.

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First, the method applied by this director reflects the administrative transition we mentioned in chapter 3. The direct assignment of welfare applied by *danwei* has been replaced. Nowadays, *shequ* prefers to provide a platform for both third-party entities and residents. In the context of economic liberalization, the state tends to reduce the cost of maintaining the welfare of the local by introducing commercial service. Although the commercial service provided in *shequ* is much cheaper than it usually is because of the national subsidy, it has not been accepted by residents yet. A manager of a service company told me that<sup>14</sup>:

*“40 yuan an hour for elder! This is incredibly cheap in Beijing! But we still don’t have too many customers. Elders think it’s a waste of money to hire people. Their children can’t make them.”*

*“40 块一小时的看护！在北京还想怎么着啊！但是就是没人来。老年人们觉得花冤枉钱。家里孩子也不能逼他们。”*

Second, political discourse has been successfully spread. A “sense of happiness” or “sense of gaining” has become a new catchphrase of local governors according to my experience. Some other respondents also regarded these political discourses created by Xi as their dynamic. Surprisingly, this also happens to other residents. Two leaders of a dancing group of a *shequ* described their feeling of being supported by their *shequ* Urban Residents Committee<sup>15</sup>:

*“We were not this serious or well-organized. But it really surprises us that the Urban Residents Committee is providing a court and some fund. We have a sense of happiness pretty much.”*

*“我们本来是随便玩玩儿，也没想怎么样。没想到现在社区能出钱、出场地支持我们，我们挺有幸福感的。”*

Third, *shequ* Urban Residents Committee is attempting to create a sense of belonging to unify all residents. If this could be successful, though *shequ* was born for

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<sup>14</sup> This was an unofficial talk when I visited HJLB *Shequ*, ID: A2.

<sup>15</sup> ID: A2.

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a better administration, the people living inside may accept a shared identity, which may merge the conceptual gap between *shequ* and community. It also provides an extra binding between the CPC and the mass if ever the sense exists. This trend is very preliminary on this stage; however, it is worth more attention.

Also, deliberative democracy, which reflects how structural power affects political practice, can be identified in the governance of *shequ*. In a *shequ*, deliberative democracy is well-organized as a secretary<sup>16</sup> told me that:

*“The principle of the foundation of our grassroots teams was ‘shequ supports residents’ interest’. Usually, they are not supported financially. We do not have an Owner’s Committee because a resident of a relocated gated shequ cannot be regarded as an owner. However, we have a ‘Residents’ Hall’ as a substitute. We organized residents to vote for a standing committee of all residents. This committee represents all residents to participate in the daily practice of XS. For example, 3 years ago, a parking issue was solved by the participation of the standing committee. We also have a commercial company provides service, such as the ‘Retirement House’. Most of our work is the organization of the ‘Residents’ Hall’ and representing the residents to outsiders. An example of the latter one is the negotiation with the ‘Galaxy SOHO’ nearby of renting the parking lot. When it comes to financing, we have a strict written procedure. When the money arrives at us from the Subdistrict, the representatives of all residents need to sign for every spending. We have 101 representatives from 5050 households. 11 of them are in the standing committee. As an Urban Residents Committee, we do not have special money for grassroots teams. However, if needed, it can be handled as a project to use the money. Meanwhile, there is 200 thousand CNY every year from the party for the mass named as ‘Funds for the Mass’.”*

“我们社区内的居民组织的成立原则是‘社区号召、居民自治’，很少有资金支持。居民以兴趣为基础参与活动。在我们社区现在是没有业委会的。因为回迁房是没有房本的，业主的资格不符合认证规定。但是相应的，我们有“居民议事厅”作为替代。居委会组织社区选举，成立了居民常务委员会。这个委员会代表居民对社区内事务行使监督、否决权。比如3年前的停车难问题，就是委员会在否决了原有方案的基础上组织协调完成的。我们的工作主要集中在组织居民公共议事和代表居民与外部协商。后者的例子就是我们与旁边的“银河 SOHO”

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<sup>16</sup> ID: C.

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谈停车的问题，最终达成了月租协定。至于经费的使用，我们社区是有严格的规章的。经费从街道拨付到社区后，一旦使用必须由居民代表签字。居民代表为 50 户出 1 位代表，共 101 位。其中的 11 位通过选举成为常务委员。作为居委会是没有特别的扶持居民组织的经费的，但是如果需要可以成立项目然后拨款。党口方面每年有 20 万的“党组织服务群众经费”可以用于扶持居民组织。”

Though deliberation is normally associated with democracy, it is not incompatible with Authoritarianism (He and Warren 2011, p. 17). In *shequ*, these deliberative means help to remedy disaffection, to gain support, and to create some democratic space which echoes the political design of the CPC (He 2018). However, the available topic is limited. Issues have been submitted to the “hall” are all unpolitical. If one, for example, is unsatisfied with the daily “studying” on the smartphone, one cannot apply for a democratic discussion.

### 5.1.2 Individual Power

Individual power does not exist alone; on the contrast, it relies on the political structure. Essentially, it is an extension of structural power through the individual as an agent. Individual power can be an outcome of political rent-seeking in the context of lacking accountability.

The first kind of individual power is obvious on the party secretary since this position controls all kinds of resources in its *shequ*. The risk is also obvious that when the secretary of the commission for discipline inspection of the CPC in *shequ* is usually the deputy of the secretary of party branch in *shequ* or even sometimes one person is assigned with both positions, the power boundary relies on individual’s moral judgment, which is not strongly reliable. A role model secretary<sup>17</sup> (模范书记) described her work to me as following:

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*“Everything even does not belong to me, can be used by me. Good social work should not be restricted by administrative range. Only if one can serve the people or solve a problem, our cooperation is possible. When it comes to inner cooperation, we need to help each other as well. Don’t be restricted by the range. For example, all the service company set up a ‘brotherhood ally’ with the leadership of Urban Residents Committee. This ally increases their efficiency significantly.”*

“天下外物，非我所属，为我所用。做社区工作不要局限于社区管辖范围的藩篱，只要这个组织可以为老百姓服务，可以解决社区的问题，我们就可以合作。对于内部合作，也是这样，不要拘泥于各自的范围，要互帮互助。例如在居委会的领导下，我辖区内的物业公司成立了“兄弟联盟”，互帮互助，大大地提高了工作效率。”

In this case, individual power leads to a positive outcome. Notable, this is the model which cannot represent all the possibilities. However, this arises a review of how individual power runs in grassroots China. When strong structural accountability does not exist, there are other means as a supplement. First, the secretary is still under the surveillance of her upper authority. When asked about how power should be restricted, an informant tells me that secretaries are afraid of being reported because of the troublesome inspection from an upper authority. Second, as described by the secretary herself, she has a strong emotional link with her *shequ* because she has worked in this *shequ* for twenty years and she lives in the *shequ* as well. This link makes her has a sense of “belonging”. Third, the specialization of daily practice is being promoted. As also reflected by other respondents, this secretary highlights the transparency of her practice:<sup>18</sup>

*“Social work must be linked with the mass. If we want to let the mass understand us, we need to be transparent, so that they know we are not for ourselves. Right now, any use of money requires a project. The regulation is not as loose as before.”*

“社区工作一定是接地气的，要想让群众理解就需要做到公开透明，让群众们明白我们不是为了个人。现在跟钱有关的都要写项目书，不像以前那么随便了。”

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Moreover, the reward of being a model is attractive. One of my respondents has been entitled with a remarkable political title<sup>19</sup>, which can be regarded as one of the highest title one secretary of the party branch in *shequ* can acquire. This leads to her term as a deputy to the City People's Congress (市人大代表) and the leadership on other secretaries who are on the same administrative level.

## 5.2 Reaction to Power

Reaction to power happens in two situations. The first one is grassroots governors react to their superior power. Smith has provided a case of township leadership becoming “hollow”, which means a dramatic decrease of the power of rural officers, because of the superior administrative interruption (2010). However, the situation in urban *shequ* is somehow different. When asked about how she operates her relations with nearby business, a secretary replies surprisingly as following<sup>20</sup>:

*“If I think the restaurant is good, I just promote it in my WeChat Moments. The owner also provides a discount for the residents of my shequ. I think this is win-win. Although the director or street does not like it, I would like to insist on it.”*

*“我觉得他们家好，我就在朋友圈里给他家点个赞。我们居民去他家也都有个折扣。我觉得这就是双赢。咱们街道主任和我说过这样不太好，但是我觉得这没问题。”*

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<sup>19</sup> As requested, the name of it must be anonymous.

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It appears that this respondent enjoys a large extent of autonomy on this topic. However, when she talks about the campaign of “studying for a stronger state”, the pressure is obvious<sup>21</sup>.

*“The director of the subdistrict asks every shequ to achieve a 90% downloading ratio of the population of party members in each shequ. This is impossible for my shequ! We on more than 900 party members in my shequ, most of them are over 65 years old. Some of them do not even have a smartphone, or even be able to see! What can we do? We can only beg their child to use their parents’ info to register an account. But we are still the last one on the statistic list of all 13 shequ.”*

*“街道主任要求每个社区至少 90%的党员都要下载手机 app。这在我们社区就不可能啊！我们社区一共九百多党员，绝大多数都是 65 岁以上的老人。他们很多人连个智能手机都没有，有的看都看不见！我们还能怎么办？只能求人家子女用老人的信息注册一个账号。就这还是 13 个社区里最次的了。”*

Another situation is the resident reacting to power. The reaction differs from group to group. The first group is an activist. According to the requirement of the central committee of the CPC, to “prosper *shequ* culture” is one of the most fundamental jobs of the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee and party branch in *shequ*. Therefore, a brunch of “autonomous interest organization of the mass” (群众兴趣自组织) has been set up in most of the *shequ* in Beijing. I have participated in the incubation of four organizations from different *shequ* respectively, three of them are from model *shequ*. All these three model organizations are well-organized, aged, and enthusiastic. The leader of one model patrol team impresses me deeply when he talks about his dynamics<sup>22</sup>:

*“We don’t ask for anything. This duty neither provides a wage nor is easy. The only thing we get is happiness. In our team, the oldest is 80, the youngest is 56. In 2008, I founded this team by the call of shequ. At that*

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*time, we were 14 people, but we have 121 now. We plan to keep recruiting this year. We only have me as a captain before, but right now we have 7 sub-teams with captain and vice-captain respectively. Now we feel like a family so that everyone is enthusiastic.”*

“我们什么也不图。这活儿一不给钱，二又累，就是图个高兴。我们队里最大的 80 了，最小的也有 56。08 年相应社区号召由我牵头成立，那时候 14 个人，现在 121 人，计划今年再扩招。原来就我一个队长，现在我们分成了 7 个分队，每个分队都有队长和副队长。现在大家都感情了，积极性也就更高了。”

Another leader of a model dancing team explains how the finance is operating in her team<sup>23</sup>:

*“Normally we have the ‘special fund for serving the mass of the CPC’. We can also get some help from CSO.”*

“平时有党组织服务群众经费，参与社会组织的项目也有资金扶持一下。”

However, the situation of the non-model one is in contrast. The leader describes her team as following<sup>24</sup>:

*“Only a little number of old party members participate in our activities. Everyone would like to enjoy a relaxing retirement. I am retired but still need to visit and take care of other older people. I only do help because the secretary keeps begging me.”*

“平时也就几个老党员来，现在人家也都想安享晚年啊。我这都退休了还得带着人去敬老，这是书记好说歹说的我就也帮帮忙。”

My experience reveals a heavy dependency on successful organizations on an individual’s spiritual strength. Although when then the team becomes successful there would be extra bonds or mental rewards, all the organizations’ initiation roots in individual’s sacrifice. Arguably subjective orientations of the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee has affected the support and participation (Jie Chen *et al.* 2007, p. 511).

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But this paper also argues that given the popular participation of the old party members, the massive promotion of self-sacrifice in Mao-era also contributes, which echoes the finding of Wan (2016, p. 1). Besides, as a political mission, incubation of grassroots organization engages with the market deeply. Governments on different levels purchase service of CSOs for incubation by bidding. However, this commercial service is the supplement of fund from the party branch and the subdistrict.

Moreover, this experience also sheds light on all the other non-activists in *shequ*. All the organizations are facing a serious aging problem. The younger generation seldom participates in their activity. As argued by Wan, “the majority others” prefer to keep a distance with the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee (2016, p. 12). However, though the participation is poor, the majority others may have a positive attitude towards the activists as described by an activist<sup>25</sup>:

*“Others would praise our work. Our families also support us fully. None of them complain about we don’t share the responsibility of housework or childcare.”*

*“大家都会称赞我们的工作。家里人也全力支持我们，我们不在家里做家务、照看孩子家里人没有怨言。”*

### 5.3 Summary

In this chapter, by applying the framework in chapter 4, power’s penetration is inducted that it runs through the structural power and individual power. The structural power is defined as the ability effects in the way as designed administratively to make things happen, to prevent something, or to create a discourse in this thesis. The increasing influence of the CPC in *shequ* reflects structural power. In the context of the dual system, there is a clear division of work between the director of the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee, which represents the government system, and the

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secretary of the party branch in *shequ*, which stands for the party system. Technically, the director should be in charge of the administrative work while the secretary should be in charge of the party affairs; however, the will of enhancing the grassroots control of the CPC causes an integrating process of these two positions in which the secretary is grabbing more power than the director. As a result, the secretary is becoming decisive in both administrative and party domain. Sometimes, this process leads to the situation that one person is assigned to both titles. Though the CPC is usually decisive in the political agenda of China, it still needs to follow the structure. The structure is the production of political negotiation between different entities. The structure would be adjusted, changed, or replaced, but before any of these processes is finished, to follow it is necessary to gain legitimacy.

The limitation of the potential topics of the deliberative democracy reflects the structural power's effect on discourse. As a structural innovation, deliberative democracy is promoted in *shequ* to arise the support of the grassroots authority. However, as led by the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee, the deliberative democracy is incomplete that topics about the party affairs cannot be discussed. In this sense, structural power decides the content of discourse in *shequ*.

Another face of power in *shequ* is individual power. As an extension of the structural power, individual power is the result of the absence of accountability. This situation entitles grassroots leaders massive power and an incredible burden. On the one hand, these leaders use such a power to extend the boundary of their behavior. Sometimes this leads to a beneficial outcome for the residents; however, the potential of the rent-seeking is always there. On the other hand, the individual power of the leaders influences residents' understanding of power. Residents believe that the top leader in their *shequ* have the power to control everything that the top leader should also be responsible for every problem. This leads to a massive amount of extra work to the top leaders. A few of *shequ* leaders can overcome it with indefatigable work.

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The motivation for them to overcome the pressure can either be a selfless spirit or an attractive political reward.

In terms of the reaction to power, there are two aspects. First, not only residents but also the grassroots leaders need to react to power. When compared to the situation in rural areas, the grassroots leaders in urban area are likely to enjoy a more flexible situation. Second, in terms of the reaction of the residents, it differs from group to group. Activists in *shequ* are the major supporters of grassroots governance. They tend to participate in the collective activities oriented by the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee enthusiastically. Some of them are driven by the pre-reform discourses; the others are motivated by the sense of belonging. In contrast, the inactive majority prefer to keep a distance from the local authority.

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## 6. Conclusion

Based on two three-months participate observations, this thesis examines how grassroots governance transforms, how power is operated, and the current situation of daily practice of grassroots governance in Beijing to answer the research question of this thesis that how power operates in grassroots urban governance. This thesis should be viewed as two parts. The first part, which includes chapter 3, focuses elaborating the transition of grassroots governance in China descriptively. The second part, which includes chapter 4 and chapter 5, tries to find the convergence of power theories and empirical materials collected in my fieldwork.

My participate observations are fundamental to this thesis. Two kinds of primary data which were collected in my fieldwork have been applied in this thesis. The first one is the data collected in the non-structured interviews. Given the limitation of topic choosing and the social hierarchy which challenged the reliability of my data, I applied a non-structured interviewing as its flexibility made it could collect as much information as possible. This information could help me overcome the challenges by reflecting various aspects of my research questions which contribute to the understanding of the research object. The second kind of data is the research notes. Since a formal interview is not always welcomed by the residents or the authority, research notes conducted during the participant observation is very useful to my research question. These notes shed light on more aspects which cannot be reflected in my respondents' words.

In chapter 3, the transition of grassroots governance in China has been revised. *Shequ*, which is the basic entity in the administrative hierarchy, is built on the ruins of the *danwei* system. Before the Reform and Open in 1979, the *danwei* system was the dominant grassroots governance system in urban China. The concept of *shequ* was barely mentioned. In the *danwei* system, *danwei* was the basic entity where local power was operated. *Danwei* was the workplace of ordinary people; also, it was the

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basic allocator of welfare as designed by the Socialist order. Every aspect of individual life, such as employment, marriage, health care, entertainment, and subsidy, relates to *danwei*. The people within the *danwei* system were not only employees but also residents. There were also urban people outside of the *danwei* system. For these people, the Urban Residents Committee was set up as the supplement of the *danwei* system. Although the specific practice was different, both the *danwei* system and the Urban Residents Committee focused on the control of the local.

The state-oriented economic liberation in 1979 changed the situation dramatically. As the urbanization caused by the economic liberation went, massive migrant population from rural areas rushed to cities. People who were registered as *danwei* employees became the minority while the migrant population grew rapidly. Technically, these new citizens were neither organized by the *danwei* system nor by the Urban Residents Committee because they were registered as “the rural residents” in the *hukou* system. *Hukou* system was designed to control the mobility; but in the need of the labor force in cities, the surveillance of the *hukou* system became looser in practice. As a result, the convergence of the missing grassroots governance in urban areas and the delay change of *hukou* system led to a chaotic and inequitable situation to the new citizens. To remedy the situation, the Urban Residents Committee was promoted as the major entity in grassroots governance. Later, the concept of *shequ* was perpetuated that it is a fixed territory which contains people. In practice, multiple administrative territories of different Urban Residents Committee were merged together to form a *shequ* in cities. *Shequ* Urban Residents Committee was set up in every *shequ* to conduct grassroots governance.

Moreover, the dual system has been highlighted in chapter 3. The dual system refers to the convergence of the government system and the party system. This notion is for counting the polarization of individual power or the party’s function in Chinese studies. In reality, the government system and the party system are overlapping but different systems. The dual system reflects on every level of Chinese administrative

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hierarchy that the secretary of the party branch in *shequ* and the director of the *shequ* Urban Residents Committee coexist. This situation influences the practice of grassroots governance significantly. Overall, the first part provides the reader with the background knowledge of the transition of grassroots governance in urban China.

In the second part, the practice and dynamics have been unfolded theoretically. In chapter 4, three key works of power theory have been discussed. Foucauldian knowledge/power provides a unique perspective to revise power as a concept. In Foucault's theory, power is agentless, ambivalent, ubiquitous. Thus, power is more than a force to drive people, but it generates knowledge. This knowledge creates discourses, which maintain rules and draw boundaries of people's life. The emphasis of the knowledge/power is crucial to understand the dynamics of behaviors in *shequ*. The discussion of the thoughts of the pre-reform era highlights the idea of "fighting for happiness". This thought is still shared by some activists in *shequ*. Tang's unifying framework provides this thesis with a definition of power. With this framework, the incubation of two kinds of power in chapter 5, the structural power and the individual power, is feasible. The summary of chapter 5 has already been provided, so it does not need to be repeated here.

In summary, this thesis tries to provide a detailed picture of the grassroots governance in urban China. The concept "community" is regarded as one of the most basic research objects in social science; however, *shequ* is more important when people study China. To understand the real China, this thesis calls for more attention to the contemporary grassroots China

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