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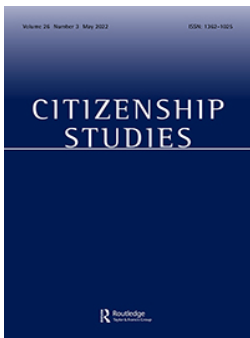
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# The dynamics of localized citizenship at the grassroots in China

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## ABSTRACT

Grassroots organizations in urban and rural China offer intriguing perspectives for citizenship studies, this article argues. Paradoxically perhaps, China is one of the few places where the right to self-government is recognized in law, through the medium of these local semi-state committees. China's response to Covid reaffirmed their importance, revealing how they (variably) organize urban and rural residents. In ordinary times, such committees create a public space theoretically open to all locals where collective norms can be formed and contested, and claims on state resources can be asserted, and are thus a locus for citizenship. Such 'local citizenship' has analogues in many societies, but in the Chinese context its strong collective orientation and its physical anchoring where people live means that it can be a space in which people's needs may be made visible and thus for a politics of citizens, even at a time of increasingly authoritarian government.

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Following the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in early 2020, the authorities imposed a city-wide lockdown, confining people to their places of residence, closing down most shops and businesses and banning all use of private vehicles, with only officially-authorized transport available to move goods and people around the city. Even for those not infected by the virus, the 76-day lockdown meant enormous disruption to people's lives.

How did people manage in these circumstances? Most international attention focused on the lockdown as a manifestation of authoritarian, top-down government. But I argue in this article that existing local participatory forms of organization were crucial in how people coped, as these forms provided institutional spaces and structure for societal mobilization and social support, and even for dissent in places. Further, these dynamics are productive for theorizing citizenship beyond the reductive binaries of authoritarian/democratic and the dominance of Euro-American frameworks in conceptualizing citizenship institutions and practice.

Central in the response to the pandemic in urban Wuhan were organizations known as 'community resident committees' (*shequ jumin weiyuanhui*). In urban China, each residential area of a few thousand inhabitants has such a committee. These are semi-state institutions that are responsible for implementing various state policies, ranging from

welfare and re-employment to urban planning and security. Typically, they have a small office, a few professional staff (in some places now called ‘social workers’), a handful of elected members (who may be retired Communist Party members) and a network of volunteers spread across the buildings that make up the neighbourhood. The degree of organization, and the facilities available, are highly variable across different neighbourhoods, depending on a combination of factors, including local history and demographics.

Some scholars have asserted that these local organizations made the Wuhan lockdown feasible; exercising control, but also providing care and support (Qian and Hanser 2021). As well as preventing movement of people between neighbourhoods to enforce lockdown and control infection, during this period, resident committees provided essential services such as organizing collective purchase of food and delivering supplies to those in isolation due to exposure to the virus. They also managed community testing, and were given responsibility for arranging transportation to hospital for those who were seriously ill, as they were authorized to call on the city’s commandeered taxi fleet for that purpose. Using the ubiquitous WeChat social media app, they acted as a hub for community information, as well as for support groups (Qian and Hanser 2021). In normal times, many if not most of the volunteers such committees can call on are retired people who have time on their hands, but as most people were not at work during lockdown, many others became involved. While spontaneous volunteer efforts outside such structures could provoke official anxiety, the committees, Qian and Hanser note, ‘provided space for uncontentious self-organizing, grassroots mobilization and civic engagement that often dove-tailed with state-mandated measures’ (2021, 56–57).

China’s initial response to Wuhan’s Covid outbreak reaffirmed the importance of these institutions and how they (variably) organized urban and rural residents, echoing findings from my own fieldwork in such committees a decade earlier. I argue that looking at how citizenship is practiced in such grassroots organizations in urban and rural China can provide novel perspectives for the interdisciplinary field of citizenship studies.

Widely designated as ‘authoritarian’, paradoxically China is one of the few countries in the world where the right to local self-government is recognized in law. This constitutional right inheres in parallel local semi-state institutions, the community resident committees mentioned above in urban areas and the villager committees (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) in rural areas. These institutions are mandated in the 1982 Constitution as mechanisms of autonomy and self-government, and have taken on increasing importance with the downsizing and disappearance of state-owned and collective sectors in both rural and urban areas. In the 2000s, following mass layoffs and privatization, they were rebranded as ‘communities’ (*shequ*) in urban areas and then later rural ones too. Their territory and administrative functions (and often funding) are determined by local government. Both in the Constitution and in relevant laws and regulations, they are designated as a legitimate sphere of political participation and a channel for making complaints.

In ordinary times, these committees can create a public space theoretically open to all who belong where collective norms can be formed and contested, and claims on state resources can be asserted, and are thus a locus for citizenship, understood as governing and being governed (Balibar 2015). This form of ‘local citizenship’ has analogues elsewhere (various types of community councils, for example), particularly in East Asia as a consequence of the diffusion of institutions of Chinese statecraft in the region. In China

with its strong collective orientation, links to the state and physical anchoring where people live mean that committees can be a space in which people's needs may be made visible and thus for a politics of citizens, even at a time of increasingly authoritarian government (Woodman 2018). Studying such institutional settings provides insight into hegemonic forms of inclusion of citizens. As both Isin (2002) and Balibar (2015) have argued, examining both inclusion and exclusion must be part of understanding citizenship regimes, as these two are co-constitutive, and each has its own forms of violence and control.

The four committees where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2008–2009 comprised two in the central urban core of Tianjin Municipality, and two in areas designated as rural, one a remote location in a mountainous region and one a village on the urban periphery rapidly being swallowed up by the city. All were committees that had been designated as 'models' (or were perceived by locals as such) and that was one reason I, as a 'foreigner', was able to spend time observing in them. My ethnography was mostly focused on the committees as spaces of interaction. Tianjin is a 'province-level' municipality on the coast near Beijing, and includes both the city and peripheral rural districts.

As is typical of these institutions, each committee had some kind of physical space in which the staff worked, local activists gathered, and which was the first port of call for people from the area who needed assistance of some kind. This included making a welfare claim, requesting a 'certification' (such as of co-residence, often related to transacting some administrative business with a formal government agency), or seeking assistance with conflicts with neighbours or even family members. To varying degrees, they were also social spaces, and the urban sites had activity rooms where there were events such as dances, singing clubs, public lectures and computer classes, as well as celebrations of festive occasions.

The committees were responsible for implementing many government policies, including administering non-employment-based welfare benefits; running re-employment projects; managing local sanitation and environment; and 'women's work', including family planning. They were also tasked with managing political participation in various forms, including periodic elections for committee officers, and were required to deal with complaints from residents, even if they had no power to resolve them, or the subject matter was outside their jurisdiction. They had a key role in 'security', which can mean a range of things, from restricting outsiders from entering the neighbourhood to monitoring people seen as an actual or potential threat to 'social stability', such as members of the banned Falungong sect, repeat petitioners and those recently released from prison. In addition, villager committees were responsible for the allocating the land that is, in rural areas, officially owned collectively, and sometimes managing leasing of such land.

If we view citizenship through a Marshallian lens as an 'instituted process' that connects citizens and the state, the committees can be seen as a nexus for these relations that gathers together in one local institutional setting many functions which elsewhere are dispersed across different parts of government. However, crucially, these relations are enacted through the medium of an institution that is not officially part of the formal government structure,<sup>1</sup> although there is a degree of ambiguity about the boundaries between state and non-state. This institutional framework also blurs the distinction between the personal and the political, between neighbours and cadres, and

makes people legible to the state at an intimate scale. It reflects a tradition of Chinese statecraft of governing through the social, but also the institutional legacy of Maoist urban ‘work units’ and rural ‘communes’ to which most Chinese people belonged by the time ‘reform’ was launched in the 1980s. This tradition of collectives that mediate engagement with the state shapes how people understand and practice citizenship. Among members of a specific collective, there is generally an expectation of equal treatment with other locals in terms of the distribution of any collective or state provided resources, and thus the potential for contention when this is not the case. There is also the expectation that the place where a person belongs is where their emergent needs should be addressed.

These characteristics mean that the committees can become a micro public. The intimate scale of these publics meant that legitimate needs could become audible and visible, if people chose to make them so, and there was a need for committees to deal with people facing emergencies or unable to provide for themselves. It is difficult for local leaders to impose decisions at this intimate scale, as I witnessed on several occasions; they had to persuade. What I call the ‘politics of gossip and talk’ could be deployed against local leaders seen as autocratic, corrupt, or not taking the general needs of residents into account. In such settings, where leaders are themselves part of the community, their reputation matters, and challenging it could be an effective tactic for those seeking to raise concerns of various kinds.

But the potential for residents, urban or rural, to make claims and raise issues of concern in the micro public of the committee’s jurisdiction was highly contingent, and varied greatly across the four sites (Woodman 2019). One factor was the history of the neighbourhood or village, and its particular political character. Local leadership, both formal and informal and the balance between these, mattered greatly, too. Both of these shaped the local social norms around what kinds of claims and entitlements were seen as legitimate. So, for example, in the urban neighbourhood I call ‘Progress’, the continued salience of socialist rhetoric, and a group of informal authority figures who promoted norms of equality, created space for the circulation of critiques of growing inequality and for claims for welfare, as well as tolerance of petty trading in and around the buildings that made up the core of the area, as many of the poorer residents in the area were facing acute difficulties in their livelihoods. By contrast, in ‘Dragon Peak Village’ up in the mountains, a group of entrepreneurial leaders had managed to establish a hegemonic vision of ‘development through tourism’ in which all the village’s considerable resources were being used to build and provide infrastructure for the tourist economy, leaving nothing in the kitty to support poor villagers who were unable to engage in these kinds of businesses. The poorest were blamed for their own situation, being labelled as ‘mentally ill’ or ‘low quality’.

The contrasts between these two locations was not merely an effect of the urban-rural divide. In the other village I studied, questions about the unequal distribution of the benefits of development as the village was becoming urban was causing significant contention. And in the other urban setting, a different hegemonic vision – of middling middle-class, educated life – meant claiming welfare was seen as shameful. I argue that the scale and intimate character of local citizenship contributes significantly to the emergence of such distinctions in local social norms, and thus to differentiated citizenship.

It is important to note that the committees are not the only form for such collective, local anchoring of citizenship in China, and that their importance varies depending on people's situation and life course stage. A minority of privileged people, including those in government service, universities and state-owned enterprises, are still connected to what are essentially 'work units' that provide for many aspects beyond work of the lives of their employees and former employees, including subsidized housing, elite schools, nurseries and so on. Scholars have noted the privilege of such 'inside the system' employment in the structure of inequality in China (Tang and Tomba 2012). In what has been termed 'community capitalism' (Hou 2011), entrepreneurial villages that have urbanized and industrialized while maintaining their rural ownership structure offer similarly generous benefits beyond wages for their members, often while exploiting migrant workers from elsewhere. In new, middle-class dominated housing developments, homeowner associations may be more important than the committees.

The fact that forms of local citizenship in China may be used to assert needs, claim entitlements and voice demands certainly does not mean that this is always possible everywhere; these forms are also used to assert authoritarian controls. Indeed, during the era of Xi Jinping (2012-), the concept of 'grid governance' has been deployed to strengthen the links between neighbour connections and policing and surveillance. There are also ways governance through the social can be coercive and disciplinary. An extreme example is that local committee structures have been used in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region to compel Uyghurs and other Muslim residents to transform even their eating habits by being forced to 'host' in their own homes outsiders allocated by the authorities to 'reeducate' them. Of course, during Covid-19 lockdowns, as well as positive examples of support and mutual aid, there were also stories of local institutions perpetrating harms on residents, such as quarantining people by sealing their doors, or instituting blanket discrimination against outsiders. Even in the committees I studied that did provide space for local deliberation, there were those who were excluded from the norm of patient listening and seen as political pariahs. In these cases, the intimacy of local citizenship meant the social could become a source of authoritarian control, without any official orders being given.

A focus on the local and on citizenship practice is certainly not new in the field. But the specific institutional articulation of local citizenship in China raises intriguing questions about how, even in an authoritarian context, neighbourhood level public institutions that explicitly are open to all residents can create space for informal forms of democratic deliberation, formulation of community norms, mutual aid and recognition of unmet needs and entitlements. Local citizenship in China highlights the importance of community-oriented public space in making self-government and collective action possible, as well as for thinking about democracy as a practice of deliberation over routine local matters. Dealing with the mundane business of living together can be an important grounding for local democratic practice, providing opportunities for listening to unfamiliar others and learning to work through the inevitable conflicts that arise (Magnusson 2021). In a sense, the fact that some of this can happen *despite* the opacity and authoritarianism of much of how government happens in China is a testament to the potential of such local citizenship institutions to realizing the democratic ideals embedded in most normative conceptions of citizenship.

## Note

1. According to relevant legal provisions, the lowest level of formal government is urban ‘street offices’ and rural ‘townships’. This is partly to do with who is considered as officially working for government, and who is not.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Sophia Woodman* is a senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science. Her research interests include citizenship, human rights, migration and social movements in contemporary China, including mobility of Chinese students for higher education. Beyond China, she’s interested in conditions for radical politics and the politics of sustainability, as well as the fate of the university as an institution.

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